Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2009 with funding from
Duke University Libraries

http://www.archive.org/details/threechances02sall

THE

THREE CHANCES.

BY

THE AUTHORESS OF "THE FAIR CAREW."

You must speak louder, my Master is deaf.

SHAKSPEARE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 65, CORNHILL.
1858.

[*The Right of Translation is Reserved.*]

T531
v. 2
Sp Co

CONTENTS OF VOLUME II.

CHAPTER I.

Page

WILL-O'-THE-WISP - - - - - 1

CHAPTER II.

THE REPENTANCE OF BARBARA ALLAN - - - 17

CHAPTER III.

GREY HAIRS TO THE RESCUE! - - - - 22

CHAPTER IV.

ETHERIDGE IN LUCK - - - - - 32

CHAPTER V.

ROXANA ENCOUNTERS STATIRA - - - 48

CHAPTER VI.

LOVE FINDS OUT HIS WAY - - - - 58

CHAPTER VII.

"MAY WE NE'ER WANT A FRIEND, OR A BOTTLE TO GIVE HIM!" 72

CHAPTER VIII.

"WILL YOU COME INTO MY PARLOUR, YOU SIMPLE LITTLE FLY?" 89

CHAPTER IX.

HOPE DEFERRED - - - - - 103

CHAPTER X.

Page

A SPARK NEAR THE POWDER MAGAZINE - - - 117

CHAPTER XI.

THE WIND CHANGES - - - - - 129

CHAPTER XII.

A SISTER OF CHARITY - - - - - 148

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LAST RESOURCE - - - - - 156

CHAPTER XIV.

"YEA," QUOTH THE EARL, "BUT NOT TO-DAY" - - 162

CHAPTER XV.

ANOTHER DEPARTURE, AND LETTERS FROM THE ABSENT, &c. - 204

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW DO YOU DO, MR. CRANSTON? - - - - 249

THE THREE CHANCES.

CHAPTER I.

WILL-O'-THE-WISP.

And now, as it is not fair to Mr. Frere that he should any longer bear the imputation of being a gay Lothario, seeking to smite two female hearts at once, let us again have recourse to his correspondence, to learn what was really the scope and drift of his present behaviour; and in order to this, we cannot do better than give a faithful transcript of that very epistle which had so strongly excited the curiosity of his valet, and the lively interest of Maria Palliser; the latter of whom would have been surprised, and undoubtedly disappointed, to find nothing either new or remarkable in the style of its address, for the letter, as Druce had discovered already, bore only the old and familiar direction to his friend Mr. Cranston.

"I answer you sooner than I had intended," it began; "a singular incident having occurred to me, which I shall not be easy till I have related; nor, in fact, till I have had your friendly counsel on the question it involves. Unsatisfying as our personal intercourse may

be for the future, compared to what it has been, it would be so preferable to this slow process of writing by a cross post, that when the adventure befell me I had nearly started off for Sheen, by the very next train that would carry me in that direction; most certainly I should, if you had been quite alone, but the old shy feeling comes over me whenever I think of going amongst the friends and acquaintances who knew me in better days. Very weak and unworthy of my baptismal name, but so it is, notwithstanding; and on second thoughts, there was another expedient for our meeting, which will answer my purpose far better, and which I trust, when you hear all my doubts and perplexities, you may be persuaded to accede to. But now for my story.

"In most of my letters lately I believe I have made some mention of little Phebe—Divet's youngest daughter, though never contemplating that she could become the subject of more than a casual remark. Now you must know that for some time past she has been amusing herself and all who observed her lively antics, with teaching one of my dogs to fetch and carry, but the creature is yet too young and giddy to be a very apt scholar. *Young* and *giddy!* in my ignorance of poor Phebe's character, I should have said those epithets would have described her quite as well as little Shako. Now and then, through some signal unheard by me, she has succeeded in making him bring me trifles not too valuable to be trusted to his discretion, and especially little notes and messages in writing, but these have come to hand so cruelly mangled by Shako's teeth, that any

missive of extra importance she has only ventured to transmit by tying it to his collar.

"After breakfast this morning I was loitering in the garden, enjoying one of the sweetest days that England can produce, while I meditated a long adieu to its variable climate, when the terrier (a Skye, of the roughest description) came bounding towards me with a letter in his mouth, or rather the fragments of one, for it had suffered great damage in its progress across the green; and before I could manage to rescue it from his jaws, it was still more injured. Nothing doubting, however, that Shako was, as usual, an accredited agent, despatched with some special message from my lively little friend, I set myself immediately to spelling out what remained of the writing. I observed afterwards, that it was *not* in Phebe's hand, or that of any of the family, but at the moment this circumstance did not strike me; and so utterly unprepared was I for the contents of the paper, that I had nearly deciphered them before their meaning became clear to me, when I discovered that they were never intended for my perusal; in fact that I was the very last person in the world to whom the writer, or the receiver, would have consigned that particular despatch.

"Cranston, you cannot be more astonished at the tenor of the letter than I was! Scarcely so surprised, perhaps, for your partial remembrance of your old friend, such as he was, may make the whole thing appear less singular to you than to those who know him now—himself amongst the number. That letter, which evi-

dently had never been read by Miss Divet (it is not the first time that Shako has made free with papers carelessly left within his reach), that letter, then, was from some friend of Phebe's, warning her, in the most solemn terms, against losing her heart to the deaf guest at Etheridge House, of whom it would seem that the poor little girl had made some honourable mention in writing to her stern monitress. How this young creature—gay almost to childishness—could have fixed on so very caustic and severe a lady, to serve as a bosom friend and confidant must ever remain a mystery to me. I am sure, Dick, if you had ever inflicted as sharp a lecture on *my* unworthy self, merited though it might have been, our correspondence would soon have closed. But perhaps these airy little beings—these dancing mites, that seem fit only to people the sunshine of existence—may enjoy a solemn scolding now and then by way of variety; even Peas-blossom and Mustard-seed may have acknowledged themselves the better for occasional castigation.

"Every thing has its ridiculous side, and surely the making *me* and *my* attractions the subject of such grave reproof and warning, must seem, to an impartial witness, as something exquisitely absurd; but by the word 'impartial,' I refer not to myself; for I honestly confess that a very considerable portion of pleasure is mixed up with all the wonder of this strange revelation. If you were acquainted with the little girl to whom this lecture was addressed, you would assuredly share my surprise, and, I think, pardon the feeling which attends it. She

seems so light of heart, and so free from any thing we are accustomed to call 'sentiment,' that I could never have imagined Phebe's affections endangered, but by some idle boy as gay and careless as herself; nay, I should have thought that *many* a shallow young fellow would have taken her fancy before the right one came, in whose company she was to flutter away her joy and existence. But it appears that I have done my little Phebe injustice; she must hide under these easy manners a depth and power of affection of which few of her sex are capable; for the language her correspondent uses, and the allusions she makes to what Phebe has confided to her, shows how serious must have been the nature of the confession. This friend, whom I gather from her style of writing to be a person of sense and prudence, and who, considering the circumstances of her mentorship, gives really excellent advice, never treats Miss Divet as a light-headed girl, whose predilections may be cured by a little friendly ridicule; the tone she assumes is rather that of one who, knowing the solidity of the character she deals with, can fully estimate the danger incurred by its possession, in loving fervently, and yet without the least expectation of having her partiality returned. For it is specially this feature of the case that interests me. My poor little friend's position is described as *so* hopeless! and yet, with all my disadvantages, and deprived of this common food of love, which is said to be indispensable to its very existence, the simple, warm-hearted girl looks so kindly upon me, that the friend who knows her inti-

mately is afraid that the happiness of her life may be perilled by the fidelity of her ill-placed passion. I may not participate in all this grave lady's apprehensions, or take it as a fact that my continued indifference would have any fatal effect upon my little Peas-blossom's ultimate prospects, but I think you may imagine that the mere hint of such a catastrophe from one who is so evidently in earnest, has something in it wonderfully grateful to an unfortunate fellow who has been tried as I have been.

"How innocently—God knows with what utter unconsciousness!—have I been playing with the affections of this sweet child; preferring her company to that of any other of the household, and encouraging her to be near me. And yet my conscience tells me I have been almost peevish with her at times, and it has required all her genuine sweetness of disposition to win me to attend to her. She has one of the prettiest hands in the world, Cranston; and those slender fingers, how they have worked! I thought for my amusement only, never guessing that her heart was in the task—conveying to me her natural, playful remarks, ay, and clever ones too,—for according to my notions, she could not be so true a lover if she were not a sensible woman.

"And now, my dear Richard, from all this you will surmise that Peas-blossom's predicament is not quite so hopeless as she and her starched adviser suppose—excuse my impatience of Miss Lucy Something—'Long,' perhaps, for the last word of the sign-manual had been torn away by Shako's fangs, and I am free to insert any

black idea that may come uppermost to supply the vacuum. Remember, I owe the good lady no small grudge for her contemptuous mention of me; her little friend, while rising incalculably in *my* estimation, is evidently lowered as much in hers, from having taken a liking to such an ungainly subject as Manley Frere.

"And yet am I not wrong at cavilling with one who has unwittingly opened to me a prospect of perhaps more consolation and ultimate satisfaction than under my circumstances I had believed it possible for me to attain?

"I do not pretend to tell you that, had I been in the enjoyment of all my senses, I should ever have contemplated making a wife of Divet's daughter—dear little girl as she is, and as I acknowledged her to be long before this tender revelation of her partiality for ear-trumpets and finger-talking. Phebe, with all her good points, is too unlike that once beloved being whom, to the latest hour of my life, must always be to me the model of female excellence—much too unlike to have attracted any serious attention of mine. Nor a few months ago could I have brought myself willingly to the idea of forming so intimate a connexion with the Divets, much as I really like, and, in their sphere, have always respected them. But now, what have *I* to do with fastidiousness of taste, or pride of position? and how can I, rejected by my first love—contemned—cast off for ever, how can I afford to throw away the unsolicited affection of an artless creature, who, if she has not the loveliness and accomplishments of Barbara,

displays, perhaps, as many womanly attractions as I can expect to fall to my lot? Were Phebe Divet even less engaging to me, I think I could take her to my heart, blessed as I should be by the thorough and indisputable evidence, vouchsafed me in this singular manner, of her truth and disinterestedness.

"I have never said much to you on this point, not wishing to teaze you with useless complainings; but ever since the two great misfortunes of my life, I have held it next to impossible that I should ever marry; feeling that under my peculiar circumstances I could never be quite persuaded that I was an object of sincere affection—loved for myself alone. My fortune and place in society would be enough in the sight of many an agreeable woman to counterbalance my personal disadvantages, and with this impression I should have been the most suspicious of self-tormentors. The more charming the woman, and the more calculated to take my fancy, so much the more mistrustful must I have been of any mark of her good-will or attention to me.

"With all my intense longing, therefore, for domestic happiness, I foresaw that I should wear out my life, a disappointed, discontented, miserable man. Surely, then, the innocent advances of one who offers to save me from such a sterile existence ought not to be ungratefully repelled. There will be doubts and difficulties to overcome and reason away—for the image of my lost darling still mingles in all my dreams of possible enjoyment. But I must bend to circumstances; and submitting my rebel thoughts as cheerfully as I

can to the will of Him who has cast me into the dust, accept the alleviation of my punishment, which the same hand, merciful as it is just, condescends to offer me!

"Such a step as I am meditating, nevertheless, demands a more than ordinary degree of consideration, and to the end that my deliberations may be wisely and well conducted, I must look to you, my dear Cranston, as my surest guide. It is a great favour I am asking, but can you spare time to come to me here at Etheridge (the Divets I know will welcome you most kindly)—survey my little Phebe with unprejudiced eyes, listen to her, Dick—as I am forbidden to do—and talk the matter over with me, face to face. It will be inconvenient to you to leave your parish so unexpectedly, but a few days is all I require, and I know you will oblige me if you can. There does not exist another being whom I could trust with such a commission as this; but our opinions on important points, and even our tastes, are so generally in unison, that whatever may be your decision as to my power of conferring or receiving happiness in a union with Miss Divet, it will have the greatest weight with me.

"Come to me, therefore, and the sooner the better, for I must not trifle longer than I can help with the loving heart that is so strangely offered to me. Ignorant as she yet happily remains of my acquaintance with her sentiments towards me, no feeling on her side intrudes between us to wound her shrinking delicacy; but it is otherwise with me; every hour that passes without my having reached some positive decision as to my conduct

and intentions, seems to be doing the innocent, unsuspecting girl a palpable wrong. Then, on the other hand, I am a little afraid of myself, lest I should hurry and spoil my game, before your reverence arrives to overlook and advise me how to play it. Since my participation in Shako's villany, I have only once encountered my little friend; but that passing interview was enough to convince me of the very altered terms on which we now stand in regard to each other: all my old indifference gone for ever and for aye! for even if it should so turn out that Phebe is not to be my little wife, I can never cease to think of her without tenderness and remorse: and yet just at the time I am of course most anxious to be in her company, and observing her as closely as possible, I am required to be more guarded and circumspect than usual, that this new-born interest may not divulge itself, and raise, perhaps, false hopes. Luckily for my purpose, we are not invariably thrown together; some one or other of the good-natured family being generally at hand when I am down stairs to talk to, and (as they suppose) amuse me. Even the superb and imperturbable Miss Palliser is not so wholly engrossed with thinking of her absent colonel and her wedding-trousseau, but that she sacrifices a little time to me at odd moments, to touch upon some serious speculation, most curiously contrasted with the light chat that is commonly addressed to me; contriving, in a way peculiar to her, to shroud every light and passing fancy with reflections of a gloomy and discomfortable character. But she is not without cleverness, and I

must have you observe her also, as a rather singular study. Remember, however, that my little Phebe must stand foremost as the object of your critical and searching remark. All that my infirmity excludes me from fully appreciating such indications of character as can be gathered only by the ear—the passing observation—the careless jest uttered at the very moment of conception, even the tone of voice which conveys so often more than the actual words of the speaker,—every thing in short, dear Cranston, that your friend is incompetent to judge of, it lies with you to weigh and determine, even as he would have striven to do in your place, and with your advantages of comprehension. Not hearing by return of post, I shall flatter myself you are already half-way to Etheridge."

The reluctance so invariably expressed by Manley Frere, to encountering even his most attached friend, till custom should have inured him to his loss of hearing, had been the sole cause for keeping these old associates asunder. Only for this prohibition, which he accounted too solemn and pathetic to be transgressed, Mr. Cranston would long before have hastened to his friend; and in all his trouble on Frere's account, there had mingled some share of mortification on his own, when he found that in this great affliction of the man he held so dearly, he was excluded from every friendly service, and positively forbidden, except by letter, to contribute anything towards his consolation and support.

Sincere was his pleasure, therefore, and scarcely less his pride, at being thus summoned to the side of his

friend, and that too with such an urgency of entreaty, no cold permission, but an actual aching desire expressed for his presence, as the most efficient and most trusted of Frere's advisers.

To have lingered at home a single moment more than he could possibly help, would have been high treason against all the laws of friendship, and as Cranston hurried on his preparations for an early departure from Sheen, he internally pledged himself to no less zeal than alacrity in the service upon which he was engaged.

In reflecting, as he often did, on his friend's course of existence and ultimate destiny, Richard Cranston had shared in all, and more than all, the misgivings which had occurred to Frere; for while the latter mourned the probability of passing his days a lonely bachelor, too diffident and sensitive to rely on his ability of inspiring a sincere regard, his friend had sadly predicted for him a still greater danger and a more humiliating fate; foreseeing the too likely chance of his becoming ensnared by some accomplished match-maker, wholly undeserving of the prize that would fall to her in the possession of such a heart and understanding as Manley Frere's. Therefore it was that in commenting on this adventure of his, Mr. Cranston could regard it in no other light than as the direct manifestation of a higher power, working for the benefit of one, who, deserving the aid of all good angels, was unable to help himself. By means at once simple and certain, he was enlightened on a point of the utmost delicacy, and bidden to rely, with faith implicit, on the warmth and purity of an attach-

ment which, but for this singular mode of communication, he might never even have suspected.

The zealous friend could indeed have wished that Miss Divet had descended from a more distinguished origin, but a woman, ready, as she had shown herself, to appreciate the merits of his dear Manley, could scarcely be less than worthy of him; in truth, when he considered the singular way in which the discovery of her sentiments had been brought about, it seemed to the somewhat romantic young rector, that it would be an actual questioning of Providence to doubt the felicitous tendency of such a striking concatenation of events.

Yet charmed as he was at Frere's letter, and specially bewitched by the sentimental tone of the narration, Cranston resolved not to let his fancy get the better of his calmer judgment, but to divest himself carefully of every undue bias, in order that he should be fully competent to the assisting his friend with the counsel he so affectionately solicited. Laying aside even a pardonable prejudice in favour of this interesting young lady, he would proceed to the examination of her character and manners with the gravest deliberation, and if, notwithstanding the sympathy inspired by her peculiar position, she should not appear really the sort of person calculated to ensure the married felicity of the high-minded and fastidious Manley Frere, no false consideration for her feelings should prevent his interfering to prevent the match. Whatever else might befall his poor Frere, he should never experience the mortification of finding himself mistaken in the trust he was unconditionally

reposing in Cranston's judgment and cool discretion; just as Job describes himself, as having been eyes to the blind and feet to the lame, so would he, Richard Cranston, be ears to the deaf, and standing in the place of his friend, perceive, feel, think and determine exactly as that friend would have done when all his faculties were alert and in full power of action. Mr. Cranston even proceeded the length of declaring to himself that being so free from prepossession, and having his imagination quite untouched, he should, without doubt, be in a capacity to pronounce a much more impartial sentence; in short, by the time the excellent Richard had turned this affair sufficiently over in his mind, it would almost seem as if he had come to the conclusion, that kind Fortune, desiring to settle Mr. Frere with the very best and most irreproachable of wives, had, in the first instance, deprived that gentleman of his hearing, to the manifest intent that, in the second, she might bestow upon him the inestimable compensation of having that partner of his existence, and future mistress of Old Court—the very she, born for no other purpose than to bless his hearth, and sit at the head of his table—chosen for him, picked out from among the daughters of men, critically and artistically surveyed, and luminously pronounced upon, by the present incumbent of Sheen, in the county of Shropshire.

It was the first time in all their acquaintance that Frere had exulted in the silence of his friend; but when his letters were delivered to him the third post after the transmission of his own to Sheen, and his anxious

sight encountered no reply from thence, his heart leaped for joy, and he said to himself, with a sort of pride in Cranston's fidelity, "I have been deceived in love, but, thank Heaven, not as yet in friendship!" Whereupon, assuming the omission of any written communication to be positive proof of Cranston's intentions, he no longer delayed informing his kind entertainers of the addition to their family party, which might be expected in the course of the day. "He knew he might take the liberty of introducing Mr. Cranston;" and Frere, as he spoke the words, was so conscious of all that was implicated in this short announcement, that he could not help being struck with the smooth, easy way in which it was given and taken.

Conventional courtesies followed, of course, on the side of the Divets, their countenances blandly confirming all that Kezia wrote down upon her slate—viz., that, although every friend of Mr. Manley must necessarily be welcome at that house, yet that this same reverend individual, known to be the one most valued by him, must, would, and should be the guest they most heartily desired, the visiter most welcome of all others to bed and board *ad libitum* at their homely dwelling. Such, at least, was the spirit of the answer, though we vouch not for the very words in which it was couched; and as Mr. Frere read it, with the slightest shade in the world of irony lurking about the corners of his mouth, he whispered within himself, "Good easy souls! They little know"——

"God bless my heart," exclaimed Divet, "to think

of having a prig of a parson forced down one's throat, whether we like it or no!"

"Dear, dear, dear! How exceedingly contrary, eh, Mrs. George?"

"Very tiresome, indeed," rejoined his daughter, preserving still her placid smile as she confronted the deaf guest. "But as he *is* coming, we may now ask the Archdeacon for Thursday, with the rest of the out of town people. It is always a good thing to have clergymen in pairs, they entertain each other."

"And are sure to agree so partic-ularly well," observed her husband; "especially if one is High and the other Low Church."

"Oh! that is of no sort of consequence to Kezia," said Phebe; "all her business is to give them a good dinner; and if the reverend partakers of it contrive to make a jumble of the old proverb, and have a fray at the end of a feast, why, e'en let them, for any thing we care."

Mrs. Barclay changed her set smile into a natural laugh as she shook her head at her sister, nor was there in this the smallest pretence or affectation, for she really *did* look upon Phebe as the wittiest and most bewitching of her sex. And Frere's eyes, following hers, rested for a single moment on the object of her love and admiration. "She has been saying something clever now," he thought—"something that charms them all. Dear little girl!"

CHAPTER II.

THE REPENTANCE OF BARBARA ALLAN.

And now, while Mr. Cranston was on his way to Etheridge, rejoicing over each station he left behind him, and burning with such impatience to meet his friend, that the thirty miles an hour at which he was being whistled and steamed along, seemed to him a very slow and tedious rate of travelling; and while he was yet some hours' space from his journey's end, along the turnpike road, and in an opposite direction to the railway, came another conveyance, also making for the town of Etheridge, but bearing no other sort of affinity to the vehicle occupied by the young Rector. It was a light and elegant open carriage, drawn by two spirited young horses, and contained a gentleman and lady, the former past the prime of life, and giving, from a certain delicacy of appearance and bending of the shoulders, rather the idea of his being an invalid, or at least of one who was ill-fitted for the wear and tear of active life. The damsel, for such she was that sat beside him, was also fair of skin and delicate in feature; yet there was a spirit in her eyes, and a compression of her lip, that spoke her, young and tender as she was, better qualified to act and

endure at need than her older companion. Happy was it for her that she inherited from her father only the best things he had to give her—his kindness of nature and good intentions—his fine features and aristocratic bearing, without having transmitted along with them that weakness of character and hesitating address which so often deteriorated from his best points.

Sorely against his will had he undertaken this morning's drive, persuaded to it by this his favourite child, whose inclinations he had never the heart to resist; but he continued still to indulge the hope that something might occur to prevent the completion of the journey, or, still better, to mar the purpose for which it was begun.

More than once, as they approached the town to which their course was bent, he had laid his hand on his daughter's, and addressing her with anxious tenderness, had sought to shake her resolution.

"Be advised by me, my love. You are not equal to a thing of this sort. It requires more nerve, Barbara, than we either of us possess;" and she had answered him with a mournful but composed voice, that it would indeed be the most trying moment of her life, but it was only in this way she could hope to regain her peace of mind. "It is all the reparation I can offer," she said; "and when it is over, I may be less miserable than I am now." Seeing that he continued to regard her with an unsatisfied air, she added more decidedly—"Father, my life is wasting away—I feel that I cannot exist with this weight—this load of guilt oppressing me.

You would not like, papa," and she looked softly up in his face—"you would not like to be the death of your poor Barbara?"

The heartfelt exclamation, the "God forbid!" with which Mr. Girdlestone answered her, showed how well the daughter understood the way to work upon his feelings. A far less earnest appeal would have sufficed to move him, and it required an effort with him to conquer or at least conceal his agitation as they drove up to the door of the goodly mansion which was to be the termination of their journey. The order to be given and the questions to be asked were apparently simple enough, yet twice he had to clear his voice before the words were distinctly repeated. "Inquire," he said to his groom, "if Mr. Frere is still at Mr. Divet's—and, if so, whether he is at home this morning?" and then Mr. Girdlestone looked apprehensively at his daughter, who sat watching the event of the message as if the answer to it were indeed matter of life or death to her, so pale and earnest was her face!

It was at this point that all similarity of feeling between the father and daughter was at an end; his liveliest wish being to shun a meeting with the injured man who was to have been his son-in-law, and whose wrongs he could not to that hour recall without wincing. Fain, therefore, would he have beheld his man trip down the Divet steps with intelligence of Frere's having left the town—and if actually out of the kingdom, so much the better. But the answer that set his daughter's heart fluttering, quashed every hope entertained by

him. "Mr. Frere was still staying at Mr. Divet's, and was believed to be at home," which reply, originally of the shortest, was amplified considerably by the butler, who, seeing a handsome carriage at the door, came out himself to parley with its occupants.

After hesitating and consulting the looks of his daughter, Mr. Girdlestone was about to deliver his card to be given to Frere, when she whispered a suggestion that if their names were announced he might probably refuse to see them, she desired Dawkins, therefore, to say merely that "a gentleman" wished to speak with Mr. Frere.

"You will not then go in with me?" said her father.

"No, when you have seen him and explained exactly my object in coming, then send for me. But I cannot intrude myself without some such preparation."

"And—and"—he hesitated and looked wistfully at her, speaking low that no word might reach the servants; "supposing him to object, say that he utterly declines an interview—then you *will* be persuaded to give up any further attempt;" and again he took her hand as if enforcing his request.

"He will *not* refuse," she answered with gentle confidence. "Only repeat to him what I have said to you, and I will answer for his compliance. But speak to him, I beseech you, father, without disguise or reservation, for all depends on that—I am sure you will do all that is kind towards us both."

"Yes, yes," he replied, nervously squeezing her hand. "I will do all I can for you, my love. But how

am I ever to make him hear?" he murmured to himself as he prepared to alight. There was also a minor anxiety which detained Mr. Girdlestone a little longer from the mission with which he was so solemnly charged. The Seabrights' horses were young and skittish; he had suspected the fact before leaving Langton, and had since been convinced of it, by their starting and shying at various objects on the road; so he dallied away a few moments more, directing the coachman to exercise them gently if they shewed impatience at being kept waiting too long, and bidding the groom, in the meanwhile, stand near their heads. Every second thus trifled with seemed an age to his daughter; but at last, with a parting smile at her, full of ominous apprehension, and another uncomfortable glance at the chafing steeds, Mr. Girdlestone crossed that rubicon, the Divets' threshold, and left Barbara to all the agonies of uncertainty and hope deferred. She shrouded her face in her veil and sat motionless, watching the open door with eyes that never wandered, and hearkening to every casual sound that issued from it, every footstep, and distant voice along the hall, that might seem the harbinger of the summons she longed at once and dreaded to receive.

CHAPTER III.

GREY HAIRS TO THE RESCUE!

THIS important invasion of the Girdlestones—for such he knew it would be accounted by the family—had not taken place without the cognizance of Druce, long before Dawkins, the dignified, had finished communing with them at the carriage-door. Frere's man, from a less conspicious station, had taken note of the Seabright crest and liveries, and from thence conjectured the name of these anonymous visiters. And now intimating that he would himself announce their arrival to his master, he speeded on his way, leaving the butler to introduce Mr. Girdlestone into an empty parlour.

By this time it was high noon: some of the Etheridge party, with the exception of Miss Palliser, and cousin Sally, who had both shortly before left the room—still loitered over their luncheon; while Phebe and her sister overlooked a time-table with the deaf guest, seeking to ascertain by which of the trains that day Mr. Cranston would be most likely to arrive.

The Divets had the tact to comprehend that Frere would naturally prefer being alone at this first meeting with so intimate a friend. No one, therefore, offered to

accompany him to the station for which he was on the point of departing, but all that was left to be done they, as usual, did well; displaying the requisite solicitude about cross-lines and junctions, while they abused Mr. Cranston, *viva voce*, as certainly "a prig," and probably a "marplot;" and it was Phebe's cue to engross Frere's attention, and playfully contradict and make blunders, and vow that though everybody pretended to understand that "horrid Bradshaw" better than everbody else, nobody in the world had ever yet made him out, or ever would; and if Mr. Manley happened to hit the right time, it would be only a matter of chance, and she should not think him a bit cleverer than herself after all.

As their guest had few visiters, and it was not the office of his man to attend to the callers at the house, nobody connected the unenvoked apparition of Druce with that ringing of the door-bell which had preceded his entrance. Those who did observe him, concluded some errand to his master drew him thither uncalled; but, had they looked in his face, they must have suspected something more than ordinary to be the matter.

Shutting the door after him as he entered, he swept the room with a glance, and then skirting round with a sidelong gait, placed himself behind his master and addressed Kezia in a tone distinct though low. "Some visiters are here, m'am, whom I judged it best to announce myself."

"Who are they, Druce?" Mrs. George complacently asked, not even looking up frrom the slate, and its creaking pencil.

"Somebody to call, eh?" said her father, as he helped himself to the remaining wing of a cold chicken. "Well, if it is any body to me, I shall just take the liberty of finishing my lunch before I make my bow to their worships—unless it happens to be some hungry soul like myself, and then they are welcome to go shares with me if they like it. The chicken is on his last legs to be sure, but there's a good portion of the pasty still to be finished, besides as fine a ham as ever came out of Yorkshire, and a bottle of Madeira that I don't believe could find its fellow within or without the pikes. So let 'em all in if they choose to come, Druce, and the more the merrier, say I." If there was any element in the soul of Joseph Druce which rebelled against the position assigned him by Providence, surely it must have been gratified at that moment, conscious as he was, that he, the serving-man, who dare not seat himself unpermitted in the presence of one of these people, had it in his power to startle them all out of their self-satisfied tranquillity, and plunge them into an ocean of perplexity and vexation. A few words would do it, and forthwith those few were given to the public. "It is a gentleman to Mr. Frere, sir; not to you. He declined sending in his name, but as he came in a carriage of the Seabrights', I suppose there can be no doubt of its being Mr. Girdlestone."

A general aspect of dissatisfaction was spread abroad at even this moiety of the forthcoming news, which the retailer seemed to have a kind of pleasure in doling out piecemeal—as wedges, gradually

increasing in bulk, were wont to be inserted in the torture of the "boots."

"Now, what in the world does he want with Mr. Manley!" exclaimed Divet, laying down his complacency with his knife and fork. "Some absurd fidget of the old fellow's, I'll answer for it! Something that had better be left alone."

"*He* is not left alone, at all events," said Druce, significantly, and continuing to sidle round as his master happened to turn his head a little towards him—"*He* isn't *solus*, for he has brought a lady with him, and she is waiting for him in the carriage."

"A lady with Mr. Girdlestone—his daughter, of course!" The news was echoed by every one present, except the person whom it most nearly concerned, and he remained standing there calm and unconscious, while every eye was involuntarily turned upon him. Even George Barclay started from his indolent attitude at the table, to inquire with sudden animation what the lady was like? "Young and pretty, eh, Druce?" to which he obtained the emphatic answer, "Quite the one, I should say, and *remarkably* the other."

"Then, I'm off!" said George. "It must be the celebrated Barbara herself, and, by Jove, I'll have a peep at her!"—saying which he flung out of the room.

Phebe coloured so highly that Frere, whose eyes were upon her at the moment when the shock occurred, thought their glances had embarrassed them, and conscientiously averted them from the face of his little shepherdess; while her sire accused her with a growl

of having been the cause of this untoward event, by informing Miss Girdlestone where to find her old lover.

"She has *not* found him yet," insinuated Druce.

"And it will be our own fault if they *do* meet," added Phebe, undauntedly.

"Of course it will," her sister rejoined, rallying her spirits, though not without an effort; for Druce's announcement was no less alarming than unexpected. "It is dreadfully indelicate of her even to call at our door, when she knows that he is in the house. But it is evident that if she wished to see him, she would come in with her father."

"But, at all events, you would have Mr. Frere denied to Mr. Girdlestone," suggested Druce; "it will be easy to lay the mistake on those that let him in."

"Most certainly, Druce, (keep on talking to him, Phebe, or he may suspect something.) You can't do a kinder thing for your poor master than keep him from coming in contact with people who have used him so ill. So run and get rid of them as fast as you can."

But Divet stopped the envoy, as he was gliding to the door. "I will go myself," said he. "Old Girdlestone is one of those shilly-shally folks who are hard to deal with, unless you know their ways. But I flatter myself I am up to the old boy, and if I don't clear our premises of him and his flirt of a daughter, in the twinkling of an eye, I'll give you leave, young ladies, to set me down for a bungler. Only keep our young man in full play—that's all you have to do; for if you let him out of this room before they are fairly off, he may

come plump into the arms of his old sweetheart. And then, perhaps, there's a scene at our very door, and the Lord knows what besides. So stick to him, Phebe! Stick to him, my girl, and keep him poking over Bradshaw till you hear me whistle outside."

"That is easier said than done," murmured his youngest daughter, as Divet took his hurried leave, for, spite of her pleasing cajolleries, and the powerful help of Mrs. George, Frere shewed an evident intention of departing. He had closed the book, and was consulting his watch, and the ladies, nearly at their wit's end, cast appealing looks at Druce, who, still hung furtively in the rear, prepared to seize occasion by the forelock, should any such advantage happen. Suddenly, that trusty servant, wheeling round to the garden-door, whispered—"There's old Mr. Divet on the terrace. Who knows but he may help us at a pinch?" and the next moment Druce was at the patriarch's side, putting him in full possession of the state of affairs withindoors.

And here we cannot but pause for an instant, to reflect what an inestimable privilege it is for an industrious and united household like the Divet's, to have amongst them the wisdom and experience of ninety years! It was just as the sisters, believing their attempts at detaining the deaf guest to be utterly foiled, were exchanging covert glances of dread and disappointment, that old Jesse, calm, smooth, and unembarrassed, entered, and arrested Frere as he was actually turning to quit the room.

It was the first time they had seen each other that day, and Frere, though chafing a little at the delay, submitted with his usual good grace, to the cordial, but protracted shake of the hand with which his old friend accosted him; especially as the Patriarch, while still detaining that hand in his grasp, seemed, by the movement of his lips and his emphatic gesticulation, to have something rather particular to say to his "good Mr. Manley." And shortly, through the medium of Phebe's fingers and Kezia's slate, it became apparent that the considerate old gentleman was strongly enforcing the propriety of Frere's going off immediately and without the delay of even another moment, if he proposed to meet Mr. Cranston at the station. It would take him, he said, full ten minutes to get there, as he refused to have the carriage, but he thought that if Mr. Manley went out the back way, by the door in the shrubbery wall, and then took the short cut to the railway through Hog's Lane and the Willows, he might still be in time for his friend, who would naturally be expecting to see him at his journey's end, and be much disappointed if he were not ready to meet him. Druce would be going also to see after the visiter's carpet-bag, and he would put his master in the right way for threading the mazes of the Etheridge suburbs.

Frere, with his usual facility, caught the Patriarch's meaning ere it was well expressed, and was infinitely obliged by the interest which that venerable person took in his affairs. And then, Druce being at hand with his master's hat and gloves, old Jesse added active service

to passive advice, he slipped his arm within Frere's, and looking lovingly in his face as they went along, convoyed him straight across the garden, leaving High Street and its dangerous concomitants far away in the rear.

Druce ran on to open the shrubbery door, and standing by it respectfully, hat in hand, cast one look back at the old lawyer, as he followed his master out of the grounds. Had his mute salutation caught the eye of Mr. Frere, it would have seemed to him only as a mark of the homage so universally rendered to the respectable character and genial temper of his father's old steward; compelling a more than ordinary observance even from the phlegmatic valet. The ability exemplified by the elder Divet on this occasion,—his comprehending and acting so instantly upon a very hurried communication, had indeed raised the "house-father" many inches in the esteem of Joseph Druce; and as he passed him with a reverential yet most significant bow, he whispered unto his own ear, that if "that shrivelled old fogey was not a brick of the very first magnitude, he never saw one that was!"

Then Mr. Divet, senior, returned at a more deliberate hobble, to enjoy the thanks and laudation of the ladies, his fair descendants; their apprehensions had subsided into feelings of intense amusement, as the perfect success of old Jesse's tactics became apparent to them; and as every vestige of the guest so deaf! so helpless! so deluded! disappeared, in the safe direction of "Hog's Lane and the Willows," the youngest darling of the old man's heart bounded to meet him, chirping and clap-

ping her pretty little hands, and telling him what a dear, good, clever granny he always was! and how nicely he was sure to manage every thing when every body else was at fault."

"Don't you know, my little Phebe," said he, as he stroked the ringlets of his pet lamb, "don't you know that it is not the young hound you should trust to in the hunting-field, but your old experienced dog, my child? He it is that leads the yelping pack and keeps them in unity, and shows them how to circumvent the fox at last," and, speaking these words of wisdom, the old gentleman assumed very much of the aspect of the animal he was alluding to.

"The p-o-o-r fox," whispered Phebe, looking up in his face with mock compassion, and then the trio burst into a hearty laugh.

But Kezia had no time for idle gossip. Relieved from all present embarrassment on Frere's account, she hurried immediately to the drawing-room to ascertain how her father was speeding with the unwelcome visiters. For her estimation of his skill in the intricacies of petty diplomacy, was very inferior to the opinion she entertained of her own. Thus she might have trusted to David for the mere act of dislodging the intruders and bowing them civilly off his premises; but there was something beyond this to be, if possible, effected; and if, through her own more delicate and subtle management, she could discover the purpose for which this startling call was made, and whether it arose from some transient whim of the fickle Barbara, or had, indeed, a

deeper meaning, and one infinitely more dangerous to the views of the Divets, it would, she thought, be a most desirable point to gain.

And, though a consideration of minor moment, Mrs. George shared something of the impulse which had forced her lazy husband out upon the causeway, and kept him still sauntering before his father-in-law's door, —the desire of catching a glimpse of the fair and false one, who had so grievously victimized poor Frere.

CHAPTER IV.

ETHERIDGE IN LUCK.

It would surely have cheered the kindly-hearted family at the mansion, could they have guessed the load of care which their manœuvres were lifting from off the bosom of Mr. Girdlestone.

Few could have been found less qualified for the mission his daughter's pathetic prayers had induced him to undertake—the very sympathy he felt for her and Manley Frere being enough to unnerve so sensitive a person, and render him wholly unfit for his delicate embassy.

Under much more conciliating circumstances, the opening negotiations with an outraged lover would have seemed to him a step of considerable difficulty; but when to the inevitable embarrassments of such a proceeding, was to be added the peculiar feature of the present case—the calamity which had rent asunder such dear and long-existing associations, and caused the violation of the fondest oaths—which had made one of the lately betrothed pair a heart-sore and indignant wanderer, and the other an object of general reproach. "Heaven help me!" was his constant reflection, "How shall I ever

get on with him, poor fellow? We *must* be private—the matter lies only between us two, and yet, agitated as we are both likely to be, how I am to make every thing intelligible to him, and express myself exactly as I desire, it passes my poor judgment to conceive."

Much did he now regret not having explained himself by letter, and while advertising Frere of the visiters he might shortly expect, giving him clearly to understand their errand in seeking him. For it was to be feared lest, in the first instance, the discarded suitor might be led to draw erroneous conclusions from Miss Girdlestone's apparent pursuit of him. Finding her thus pressing for an interview, he might not unnaturally suppose that his former mistress was solicitous to renew the engagement which had been so ruthlessly broken off, instead of the end she professed to have in view, simply the soothing of a troubled conscience, by personally confessing the heavy sense she had experienced of his wrongs and her own weak conduct, and obtaining from him, in a last adieu, the forgiveness she declared to be essential to her peace of mind.

But upon this bold step, the contemplation of which had for some time secretly occupied her thoughts, Barbara had refused to listen to her father's arguments for a preparatory explanation, but stigmatized writing as an unsatisfactory and uncertain medium of communication; and, in defence of the young lady's obstinacy, it must be admitted that she had reason to call it so; more than one letter, addressed by her to Manley Frere, after the rupture of their engagement, having, as she

accidentally discovered, been suppressed by those members of her family who were adverse to his interests. And even should he be thus apprised, she feared that the resentment still likely to be animating their injured friend, would induce him, if forewarned, to deny any request that came from her. She thought her only hope of being admitted to his presence rested on the circumstance of taking him wholly by surprise. There was a motive beside either of these which weighed with her—a powerful inducement not to dally with time and opportunity, in the temporary absence of the aunt, whose aversion to Mr. Frere had been the mainspring of Barbara's estrangement from him. Up to the preceding day Mrs. Barrington had likewise been a guest of the Seabrights', and she would probably return on the morrow, or even the ensuing night might bring her to her niece's side again, there to resume the strict watch and authority, which, under much outward propriety of deportment, she continually exercised over her.

Swayed by these concurring incitements, therefore, to the execution of a project over which she had secretly brooded ever since her meeting with Phebe Divet; Miss Girdlestone's caressing persuasions had silenced the opposition of her soft-hearted father, but had never diminished his reluctance to encountering once more the melancholy and reproachful glance of poor Frere. And now he remained conning all he had to say to him, and growing more nervous the longer he was left to meditate alone, when the entrance of Divet, with his bustling urbanity, and that best of all consolations, a

positive announcement of the deaf guest's absence from the house, relieved him at once from his embarrassment. Five years at least might be said to lift their traces from off his broad but furrowed brow as he imbibed these words of comfort; and five more might well be added to the number when Mrs. Barclay, with her winning address and courteous attentions, appeared to confirm them.

It was indeed astonishing, considering their late spasmodic attack, how very much at their ease the trio suddenly found themselves, for the single look which Kezia directed towards her father as she joined him in the parlour, satisfied David that, somehow or other, the proprietor of Old Court was properly disposed of.

Nevertheless, Kezia treated the fact of his absence with appropriate regret. "So *very* unlucky that their good friend should happen to be out, only *just* gone! and yet too far to give them a chance of recalling him!" and, as for his return, old Divet and his daughter joined their voices as one to declare the utter uncertainty of that event—"a thing in fact never to be calculated on with poor dear Mr. Manley"—who was so very uncertain in his movements. "But," Mrs. George went on to say, "if Mr. Girdlestone, or any of his family, wished to leave a message for Mr. Frere, she herself would answer for its being repeated to him *verbatim*." The visiter began an evidently uneasy negative, and Kezia, more softly still, while her penetrating eyes searched every nook and cranny of his countenance, burthened him with additional civilities—"or if any thing of *more*

importance? more confidential in fact—a note, perhaps? or some written memorandum? for affairs of consequence ought not to be trusted to verbal messages—especially when the infirmity of their dear friend was taken into account."

Mr. Girdlestone, too glad to be quit of his commission without any further trouble, answered with some haste that the matter had better rest there. He thanked her for her offer, but would merely leave his best regards and good wishes. And then resuming more self-possession, "he had certainly," he proceeded, "indulged the inclination to take a personal leave of Mr. Frere before his departure from England—an event, he understood, to be shortly expected, but"—and here the sensitive visiter faltered again, for he observed Divet's daughter, while lending a respectful ear to him, directing a look out of the window at which she had placed herself, and from whence was obtained a full view of the street, and, consequently, of the phaeton and the fair form which occupied it, and which was at that moment in the act of being driven gently from the door. It was a glance which seemed to say, "This is all very well, old gentleman, as far as *you* are concerned, but what brings your daughter here, I should like to know?" in some such way, at least, Mr. Girdlestone must have interpreted the action of Kezia's eyes, for he hesitated and lost the thread of his discourse. She, however, though suspecting what had annoyed him, and secretly amused by it, came promptly to his relief: for Kezia's was a spirit that did not (like that of her sister Phebe)

revel in mischief solely for its own sake. If, indeed, in the prosecution of any little pet scheme she happened to disturb the equanimity of a neighbour, causing him, her, or it to look like gander, goose, or gosling, as the case might be, she could derive much secret enjoyment from the spectacle of their absurdity, but was too wise ever to peril her security on the chance of such transitory gratification. Her object now was to conciliate rather than provoke, so, anticipating the questions her visiter was likely to put to her, she began in her pleasing and apparently natural manner to tell him of their good friend's excellent health and spirits (here, by the way, the elder sister did *not* disdain the example of the younger, and the report was copied pretty closely from that with which Phebe had previously favoured Miss Girdlestone). Frere was described as preserving most wonderfully his powers of enjoyment in spite of that severe affliction, which those who had known him in his brighter days could never cease to deplore.

To this Mr. Girdlestone warmly, and almost with tears in his eyes, rejoined, that he believed it impossible for Manley Frere, under any circumstances, to conduct himself otherwise than as a Christian and a man of firm resolution. "He was, nevertheless," he added politely, "highly gratified to have his opinion so undeniably confirmed, and he assured his apparently sympathizing auditors, that the account they had been kind enough to give him of their mutual friend, would recur to him as one of the most pleasing recollections of his visit to their charming county."

The Divets trusted that this was a parting speech; the compliment with which it was rounded serving the purpose of the rhyme in an old comedy, to get the player neatly off the stage. But though Mr. Girdlestone had risen as he concluded it, he deferred a little longer the final shaking of hands, for it would be unmannerly, he thought, to break away from these worthy people too abruptly; and, as a subject *apropos* to Divet's former calling, a supposed predilection, he referred to the executorship in which they had once been associated, and expressed a grateful remembrance of David's kindness on that occasion, in taking so much trouble off his hands. "Without the friendly help of you and your kind father, Mr. Divet, the office in which I was involved, simple as it probably appeared to you, would have proved a sore burthen to a person so little accustomed to business as I was in those days. And, speaking of your father, I am given to understand he is still living, although in the words of Scripture we may say, that 'he went for an old man' even at the time I knew him."

The Divets answered—and truly it came from the heart of both old Jesse's descendants—that, indeed, their excellent relative was still an inhabitant of this nether sphere, and that, notwithstanding his term of years, he was as replete with life and energy as the youngest amongst them—"the blithest as well as the wisest of our happy fireside." Miss Palliser might have sneered at the phrase, yet it was true to the very letter, and might well justify Mr. Girdlestone's remark, that it

was "always grateful to him to hear of a long and well-spent life, rewarded towards its close by peace and prosperity." He had got thus far in his congratulative speech—but when mortal man begins a sentence, let him never calculate too securely on getting to the end of it! The Divets, aware of Mr. Girdlestone's susceptible temperament, exchanged ironical smiles when they saw him, as a slight noise was heard in the street, break off abruptly to look out of the window. "They were used to such disturbances," they told him, on "market days; trifling fracas would be occurring in spite of the police. The animals brought for sale would occasionally get loose, and idle boys were never wanting to chase and annoy them."

Mr. Girdlestone's only reply was a positive assurance that, if he had known it to have been market-day at Etheridge, nobody in the world should have persuaded him to have set foot there, not at least with those unruly horses of the Seabrights. He wished he had insisted on bringing his own with him to Langton; poor Mr. Girdlestone passed most part of his life in futile wishes that he had "insisted" on something or other.

"There is surely more than common excitement in your street," he said, still lingering at the window. "I see people running to one direction as if something was attracting them, and the carriage is not even in sight, though I desired it might remain within call—I wish," he murmured again, "I wish I had insisted on Barbara's alighting!"

Kezia marked every word that fell from him in refer-

ence to his daughter, and rightly inferred that this strange visit to Manley Frere had originated chiefly with her; sincerely did she wish both father and child on their road back to Langton, for, should they tarry much longer, they might still encounter him returning from the station.

Divet rang for some one to follow and recall the carriage, but Mr. Girdlestone grew too anxious to wait quietly for its announcement. He would bid them "good-day," he said, and be ready to join his daughter as soon as she returned.

And down-stairs he accordingly went, attended by the Divets, who did their utmost to sooth his apprehensions, stoutly denying that accidents either to man or beast ever occurred in their well-regulated town.

Kezia suggested that the present slight disturbance might arise from a couple of boys fighting in the market square, or a quarrel amongst the poultry-women, and her father confirmed her supposition with—"Very likely indeed, my dear—nothing more probable; or, perhaps some unlucky pig had got loose and was chased by the boys: he would answer for it that *that* was the full extent of the mischance."

But the amendment had better have been left alone, the pig did not please. For what, it was objected, *could* be more dangerous, more mischievous in the path of two high-mettled horses, than such an animal shrieking and running under their very hoofs! *Only* a pig, forsooth!

"*Only* a barefooted friar!" The Pope could hardly

have turned a more severe look on his baronial penitent, when he hazarded that same incautious form of words, and Mr. Girdlestone's pace quickened to an old-gentlemanly run as he touched the hall pavement.

Even his companions lost some of their calmness, and all their indifference, when, reaching the open door, they saw how considerably the excitement had increased during their descent from the upper story. The distant din of voices might be heard more plainly, and some of the inhabitants were leaving their shops, to run off to the scene of action.

"What's the matter, Mr. Tufnall?" Divet called out, running down his steps to waylay and interrogate an opposite neighbour, whom he perceived preparing to start in the same direction. "Can you tell me what has happened?"

"There's been a bad accident, Mr. Divet, down by the market, close upon Church Street, sir; I hope it has nothing to do with that carriage and the fine horses I saw standing at your door just now. But I hear talk, Mr. Divet, sir, of some phaeton that's been scared and smashed all to shivers, by the great caravan that came into town this morning."

"Smashed by a caravan?" repeated Divet anxiously, there was no lack of interest now in his questioning.

"Yes, Mr. Divet, that's what this good man here has been telling me. That lumbering show-cart, as goes about with the picture of the wonderful cow with two heads—your thorough-bred beasts can't abide them pictures, and that's it as has done it, sir."

"No, it warn't," said the country fellow he appealed to.

"Why, you told me it was, just now!"

"No, it warn't no such matter! It wor a calf with six legs, for I seed it myself for a halfpenny."

"Bless my heart!" exclaimed Divet, "here's a precious piece of mischief! Do you happen to know, my friend, if there was anybody in the carriage—a lady? a young lady? Eh?"

"No, no," said the fellow, sticking pertinaciously to his text, it wor a calf with six legs, I tell 'ee."

"Pish," said David between his teeth, and crossing back to his own door, met Mr Girdlestone hurrying down the steps, for the fearful report had reached him also, and resisting all Mrs. Barclay's efforts to restrain him, he was intent on rushing wildly in search of his daughter. But Divet set off at a much quicker pace than the trembling limbs of the father were able to carry him, and, followed by some of his own servants, was soon half down the High Street.

"I would not mention it to the gentleman, sir," said one of them as he came up with his master, "but they say the young lady that was waiting for him, has been overturned and killed on the spot."

"Good God! Dawkins, you don't say that!" exclaimed Divet, turning pale with horror and relaxing his speed. "What on earth's to be done with that poor old man? and who is to break it to him? Mrs. George must do it, she must do it all herself, for I am sure I haven't the heart. But accidents are

commonly exaggerated, and I trust we may find it so in this case."

As he added the hopeful remark, however, a group advanced upon them, from a short cut to the market-place, the aspect of which seemed to justify every evil report which was current.

Shrinking as it became visible to him, Mr. Divet caught the butler's arm and covered his eyes for a moment, for he too was a father, and an affectionate one! A female form, apparently lifeless, was being borne along by two persons, whom Divet in his emotion scarcely recognised as young Moss and his own son-in-law. The former, attracted from the window of his master's surgery by the Seabrights' showy horses, had lounged after them as they pranced and curveted along the street; the latter, whose curiosity to survey the far-famed beauty of Barbara Girdlestone, had been signally foiled by the impenetrable veil in which her features were muffled, still followed in her track, and as he trusted to some lucky chance for affecting his purpose, little dreamed how soon or how sadly that object would be attained. The horses, scared by encountering an object so strange to them as the showman's huge waggon, plunged and reared, and, becoming unmanageable, bolted in the direction of the crowded market. Shouts and cries arose from every quarter, as they struggled madly on, overturning every lesser obstacle, and coming in frightful contact with such as were formidable enough to dispute the way with them.

The carriage rocked and swayed from side to side,

yet Miss Girdlestone kept her seat with a seeming composure, which might result from either the stupefaction of fear, or from a portion of that female heroism, which shows itself in passive endurance. It was only a few seconds before the catastrophe that she had arisen, and, uncovering her face, looked around her with a glance which, in its beauty and helplessness, appealed to the heart of every spectator. Another moment, and the carriage, coming in fierce collision with a loaded cart, was overturned, and the young lady precipitated upon the pavement with a violence that might well warrant the frightful reports which ran like wildfire through the town. Had she fallen on the sharp stones of the market-place, it was supposed the concussion must have been fatal to life or limb, but there chanced to be some straw and empty sacking scattered about the spot, and on this circumstance, young Moss and another medical man, who had rushed from his shop, to proffer assistance, grounded some hope of a more favourable termination to the accident.

She was taken up insensible, and had but once, and then only for a trifling interval, discovered any sign of animation. The same wild hubbub was in her ears, the same objects, now so fearful to her senses, were still around her, and she had closed her eyes with a shudder, and relapsed into utter insensibility; but this was enough to shew that life was not extinct, and it was resolved to transport her immediately to the repose and excellent attendance she was sure of finding at the mansion. In the opinion of Mr. Moss at least, such a measure was

evidently preferable to carrying so distinguished a patient to the surgery of the rival doctor, on the opposite side of the square.

"That puppy, Master Moss, for ever prowling about and poaching on other people's preserves!" this was the reflection of him of the market-place, while the pretentious spirit—the touch of aristocratic insolence—which marked High Street for its own dominion, vented itself in a secret whisper, "Let him make a job of the coachman's broken head, if he pleases; but I'll be hanged if the old humbug shall lay a finger on her."

Despatching a messenger, therefore, to apprise her father and the Divets of their approach, the young men disposed of their beautiful charge as tenderly as they could, and taking the shortest way to the mansion, had thus come to shock the sight of its excitable master. Fortune had this day shewn herself singularly well-disposed towards the population of Etheridge and its adjacent farms and villages, offering them a store and variety of entertainment, scarcely to be paralleled by the last great fire, or the chairing of the Radical member. In the market-place the accident had caused traces of devastation, which could not be surveyed too earnestly or too long: here were stalls overthrown, and crockery demolished or sorely injured, the owners thereof exalting their voices in clamour or lament. There lay the carriage with its broken pannel, the Seabright crest no longer to be distinguished, (meet emblem of man's pride and fall!) and there stood the fine creatures that had

done all the mischief, now subdued and trembling, and submitting to be soothed and patted by even the weakest of the throng. Add to these various attractions the presence of a bleeding coachman, and a groom onthe very point of distraction, and it will be evident how much the Etheridge public had to be grateful for on that particular occasion.

Seeing what recreation was provided for the most opposite tastes, we may imagine that the daring and turbulent, and such as are best satisfied to study life in its melodramatic phases, would stick fast at the scene of the disaster, leaving the lovers of the pathetic (a less numerous but more select band) to follow the heroine of that sad catastrophe. Amongst these a low and pitying murmur took place of the wild shouting in the market square, and the tramp of feet along the High Street raised a strange and solemn echo in that usually quiet and uneventful quarter. The windows were thrown up as they passed by, and many a face looked out whose expression of common-minded curiosity was invariably changed at the sight of the young and lovely woman who all believed to have come to an untimely end. An universal interest was shed abroad, respectful and even tender in its character, which for the moment elevated and humanized the very coarsest of the gossips as they signed to each other from house to house; and when, to complete the piteousness of the scene, there came the father's wild cry and despairing gestures as he met his child, many a tear was shed over the day's tragedy from eyes that were seldom known to weep

for any sorrows but their own. And so the doleful cavalcade went slowly up the steps of the mansion, and the crowd were left, wondering, lamenting, moralizing after their fashion, and gossiping round the doorway.

CHAPTER V.

ROXANA ENCOUNTERS STATIRA.

Mrs. Barclay, equal as she always shewed herself to the ordinary emergencies of life, succumbed at the sight of such suffering and deep grief as this; like the proud steed in the market-place, lately so overflowing with strength and energy, she had grown tame and timid, and followed the suggestions of Mr. Moss with a docility almost too implicit; for, in obedience to his directions, that his patient should be immediately carried up-stairs and placed in bed, Kezia, in her temporary confusion, was nearly guiding him to the very neighbourhood of Mr. Frere's own chamber. She recollected herself only just in time, as they mounted the front staircase, and actually shuddering at the mistake she had so nearly committed, in lodging the corpse of his once beloved mistress so near the deaf guest, proceeded to collect her thoughts, and marshal the way to a totally different quarter of the irregular old mansion.

It was just at this moment that Maria Palliser came amongst them. She had been cherishing her new-born fancies in solitary luxury, and with the gallery-door closed between her and the outer world, not the remot-

est whisper of what was electrifying the rest of the house had yet reached her. Unbounded therefore was her astonishment as she suddenly encountered the ascending group.

Mrs. George, with a pale scared face, unlike any thing Maria had ever seen her exhibit till then, immediately confronted her, and advancing softly up the wide oak staircase came Kezia's husband and another, bearing what seemed to be the lifeless body of a young and beautiful woman. Her bonnet was off, and her hair, which was most luxuriant, escaping from restraint, hung in rich disorder round her death-like face, and over the shoulder of him who supported her. The most skilful artist in the world, if he had studied how to heighten the effect of the group, might have spoilt its simplicity, but could have added nothing to its silent interest.

It was long since poor George Barclay had been likened unto a minister of grace; yet such is the power of beauty, when it bears a high and intellectual character, still more when it is allied to the shuddering mystery that waits upon death—that Maria could think only of some martyred saint being carried by angels into Paradise. The lower adjuncts of the picture, to her altogether unaccountable, did little to disturb its solemn yet tender character; for the stranger who leaned upon Divet's arm was mute for very grief, and the female servants, creeping up behind, moved with quiet steps, and whispered their pitying words as softly as they could.

The procession had advanced a step or two before Maria could remove her fascinated gaze from its princi-

pal figure, or ask the meaning of a scene so strange; the fulness of her wonder and admiration left her no room for the working of mere vulgar curiosity; but then she was struck by Kezia's mournful gestures, the raised hands, and the head shaking to and fro, and she heard her suppressed voice demanding sympathy. "Was not this shocking?" she asked her. "So awfully sudden! Dreadful! dreadful!" and the Colonel's betrothed answered Mrs. George after her own peculiar fashion—their turn of thought could at any time have but little in common.

"Dreadful, do you call it?" she asked in her turn. "Dreadful? To have lived so beautiful, and died so young! But how came she here, and who is she?"

Kezia was turning off to the chamber where the bearers were to deposit their burthen; but at that question she approached for a moment the ear of her interrogator, and, fixing upon her a look that spoke volumes, whispered a name which caused the hearer to start and gasp as though a visible sword had pierced some vital part of her body.

There she stood, as the procession passed on, staring after it with distended eyes, and repeating the words which had so shaken her: "Miss Girdlestone! *His* Barbara! and lying dead before her eyes! What could it mean? Was she herself awake and in her right mind? or had the strangeness of her own position, and the strain of unusual excitement in which she had of late been living, conjured up some mockery of the senses, most vivid but still unreal?"

She shook off her trance of amazement, and, following slowly, saw the inanimate form conveyed into a chamber at the end of the passage, the door of which was closed after the principal group and a few of the women had entered it, George Barclay alone returning to join Divet in his attentions to the agonized old man, the other stranger in this inexplicable scene, who by his gestures seemed intent on forcing his way into the room where they had deposited the beautiful corpse, and who could not, in his half-frantic state, be made to comprehend that his presence there would be improper.

Mr. Girdlestone had indeed lost all command of himself, and even the gentle courtesy which seemed, on ordinary occasions, a part of his very nature, gave way as he experienced the mild but resolute opposition of Divet and his son-in-law, and he imperiously demanded, "Who they were, that they should lay restraint upon *him*, or dare to separate him from his own daughter? He *would* go in, and nothing should prevent him! how did he know what they were doing to her? They talked of a doctor—he did not believe there was one there—he had not seen any. *That* young man—*that* boy—did they call *him* a doctor? and, if they had sent for better advice, why did it not arrive? Did their wretched town—accursed was the day when he entered it!—did it possess no decent surgeon? nothing better than this inefficient youth?" and while David's soothing words were heard vindicating young Moss's professional talents, Barclay, with sounder judgment, was humouring the childishness of the father's grief, and promising the

speedy arrival of more and still more doctors, all to be of the highest reputation and most reverend aspect.

Then Mr. Girdlestone's grief took a different turn, and he fell to lamenting that he had ever come thither, reproaching himself bitterly for having acceded to his daughter's wishes against his own convictions. But he was "weak—always weak," he said—"easily guided against his will, and too often against his conscience; and he never had had the heart to deny his darling any thing she asked him. But now," he went on, melting into tears—"what will become of me if I am left not only to mourn for her—not only that, but to accuse myself to the end of my miserable existence as the cause of all that has happened?—for oh, Mr. Divet!" and he wrung David's hands, and looked him in the face so piteously that the other could hardly keep from weeping also—"had I resisted her persuasions as I ought to have done—and as I knew I ought—she never would have come here—never, sir! It is I who have done it all; and there are people in the world cruel enough—I know there are—to perceive a judgment in it, and—and talk of retribution—and perhaps it is—perhaps it is—God knows!" and he bowed his head upon his hands, and gave himself up to his affliction.

Such exclamations, broken as they were, and sometimes scarcely articulate, conveyed to Maria Palliser matter far more precious than any thing she could gather elsewhere. There were two or three of the inferior servants, whose attendance in the sick-room being unrequired, they nevertheless were loath to leave its neigh-

bourhood. These were eager to relate what they had heard respecting the young lady's accident—too eager; for Maria, intolerant of whatever was coarse in thought or expression, soon shrank from the details which delighted them.

Nor to say sooth, did the accesses of poor Mr. Girdlestone's unbridled affliction find much more favour from Maria's somewhat bold and masculine nature. How was it possible for her to sympathize in such an expression of woe as she would rather have died than displayed in the eyes of the world? Her reflections now in most cases, and especially on the occurrence of any thing out of the common course of daily life, bore instant reference to the object of her secret adoration. In the place of Manley Frere's false mistress, she figured him himself stretched dead in that closed room, and imagined the feelings that would inspire her at such a moment. The love and respect she had conceived for him as an inhabitant of earth, would, she thought, be heightened to the sublimity of veneration, when she knew he had cast off the clothing of mortality, and was exempt from every tinge of weakness, or the possibility of human corruption. Weep she might and must for her own irreparable loss—irreparable, indeed! for how could her bewildered soul hope to follow his in its upward path of light and glory? But her tears would flow mutely, in darkness and solitude. Yes, there would be eternal mourning in her withered heart; but not such wailings as that weak old man was giving way to—breaking the fine deep silence of Death, and offending its awful majesty.

Maria's thoughts could not long rest there. She was wondering how Frere would take the news of what had befallen a person once so dear to him. Feelings so tender and forgiving as his must be powerfully moved, yet surely not so heavily, or with such a stirring of old remembrances and bygone regrets as would have tortured him a day or two ago, when he believed himself a solitary creature cut off from the love of woman, with no trusting heart to lean to for hope and consolation. Ah! if it were really her lot to be this blessing to him, she should not then have been born in vain!

The opening of the chamber door startled Maria as well as Mr. Girdlestone; the attendants had been frequently to and fro, despatched for such things as were required by the surgeon, and each time the hapless father had hurried to intercept them, seeking some encouragement to hope that these efforts to reanimate his patient would be at last successful—that life was not wholly extinct. But from each fresh inquiry he had fallen back disconsolate—"She breathed," they told him, "but that was all"—and then the speakers had hurried off, as if shunning further question.

Now, however, it was Mrs. Barclay who came forth alert and smiling, pleased with the news she had to bring, and with herself for being the first to tell it. Mr. Girdlestone met her with a cry of delight, for her looks were not to be mistaken. And then they seized each other's hands, and Kezia, while tears of real feeling ran down her cheeks, assured him that his darling was

restored to him—that she had opened her eyes—had spoken—would soon be quite herself again. Moreover, that it was the surgeon's opinion that the nervous system only had been acted upon, and that, further than some bruises and concussions of no material importance, he believed his patient to have received no serious injury. Such were Mr. Moss's own words, and she had flown instantly to spread the joyful news. In a few—a very few minutes more, Mr. Girdlestone should be admitted to see his dear girl; and with another sob of kindly emotion, another hearty shaking of hands, Kezia moved briskly back to her post by the bedside of the invalid.

The father bowed his head upon his hands as he uttered an inward thanksgiving, and there was joy in every heart—save one. Even Mrs. George ceased for the time being to weigh her private interests against the general satisfaction. Her sense of the infinite risk to the family plans and proceedings, in having Frere's old "flame" quartered upon them, and brought once more in dangerous contact with the master of Old Court—her acute perception of the inconveniences likely to accrue from this unlucky accident, were merged for the time being in the better impulse which caused her to rejoice unfeignedly over the restoration of the young creature, towards whom she was acting the part of an assiduous and tender nurse.

Not so with Maria Palliser: The tolerance she had had for the dead beauty was not to be extended to the living one; as long as that fair form lay lifeless and

apparently clay-cold, it might be contemplated with interest and the sincerest admiration. She looked upon the human statue as powerless henceforth for good or evil: its course on earth's troubled surface being completed, it could tempt and deceive no more. But when the life-blood was said to be circulating again in its blue veins, and it must once more be counted as a thing of sense and motion, then the case was altogether changed—that which had seemed but as a dwarf one moment, had sprung into a giant the next, and was no longer to be either pitied or despised. Miss Girdlestone might never again resume her empire over the affections of Manley Frere—she might not even wish it; the same objection to their union which had caused her to throw him off, existing as prominently as ever. She was perhaps coming only in the spirit of coquetry to trifle with his feelings, and display once again her power of wounding to the uttermost one of the noblest creatures in the world. And yet the event of her presence there might possibly be scarcely less dangerous to Maria's growing influence. This new-born partiality for herself, which she believed to have originated rather from the gratitude of Frere than any livelier sentiment, could hardly have acquired strength sufficient to cope with all that train of old charms and associations which the sight of Barbara would be sure to bring back. It might be her lot to lose him just when her hopes were at the highest; the only glimpse of happiness that a harsh ungenial destiny had ever held out to her, might be snatched from her sight irrevocably, through the agency—contemptible

in itself, and yet most mischievous—of a heartless jilt. Thus at least Miss Palliser reasoned, and she listened to the announcement of Barbara's revival as to the death-knell of all her fondest anticipations.

CHAPTER VI.

LOVE FINDS OUT HIS WAY.

Over the mountains, and over the waves,
Under the fountains, and under the caves,
Over floods that are deepest which Neptune obey,
Over rocks that are steepest, Love finds out his way.

Mr. Girdlestone was soon admitted to his daughter, and few could behold the interview unmoved. The weak, fond father hung over his child in speechless gratitude, and she, finding him anxious about her safety, dispersed the tears his tenderness had brought into her sweet eyes, that she might assure him of her certain and entire recovery, declaring the injuries she had sustained to have been the merest trifles—"a few little bruises and a sprained ankle, and a 'silly knack' she had somehow acquired (like Rosalind), of fainting away. But she should soon be quite herself again—sooner perhaps than she deserved." This was said in a whisper as she looked sadly into his eyes, and then deeply sighing she gazed about her, and for the first time inquired "where she was."

"I don't know this room," she said, "nor these good people. Am I in an inn, papa?"

"No, my sweet," was the reply; "you are just where you wished to be, my Barbara—you are in the house of Mr. Divet."

If ever sunlight—the radiance of hope—might be said to burst visibly over the face of woman, it was perceptible in that of Miss Girdlestone as these words met her ear. She raised herself at once from her languid attitude, and turning to the speaker with sparkling eyes repeated joyfully, "The Divets! their house! Oh, there must be fate in this! Father, there *must* be fate in it!"

Mr. Girdlestone participated little in the joy of his daughter, though he had not the heart to check it. "Yes," he replied courteously, "you are now under Mr. Divet's roof, my love; and this lady, whose tender care of you I can never hope to repay, is Mrs. —— ahem!" (Kezia's married name had quite escaped him;) "in short—Mr. Divet's eldest daughter."

At this hint the young lady recollected herself, recognised Phebe, who had hitherto escaped her notice, as an old acquaintance, and expressed most engagingly—for indeed what could Barbara Girdlestone say or do that was not engaging?—her gratitude to Mrs. Barclay, and her great regret at the inconvenience she was occasioning. "She was so ashamed of herself! such a troublesome creature as she had been to them all!" Yet, spite of this prettily worded compunction for the trouble of the Divets, it did not escape notice that when Kezia blandly (but with a motive) rejoined, that the seeing their patient so nearly restored and capable of exertion, was sufficient compensation to her nurses, she was mildly but firmly corrected.

For the truth was, that, while supposing herself occupying merely the chamber of some house of public entertainment, Miss Girdlestone had been anxious to make light of her accident, and leave the place as soon as possible; but when she found that it was neither White Hart, Black Swan, nor Rising Sun which was affording her shelter, but, as her father justly said, the spot of all others where she would most desire to take up her temporary abode, then the case assumed another aspect, and inspired a very different line of conduct; then she grew suddenly aware of the *serious* nature of her injuries, and expatiated upon them with a minuteness and decision far more in consonance with the professional views of Mr. Jones's assistant than with the inclinations of her hostess.

"This gentleman," said she with a bewitching smile at young Moss, "assures me that I have not broken any of my limbs; but sprains you know are often considered worse than positive fractures, and this right ankle has suffered dreadfully—in fact, both feet," looking on them with a sort of languid complacency, "both have been jarred to a horrid extent. My shoulders, too, if it were not for what he says, I should have thought them quite dislocated—and look at my poor wrist, see how it has been bruised by those hard-hearted stones in your market-place. In short, I feel just as if I had endured martyrdom—perfect martyrdom, papa—the wheel or the rack, or some horrid instrument or other, and I don't suppose it would be possible for me to stand without assistance. Do you think it would, sir?" again softly

appealing to the young doctor, who, attended by Mrs. Spicer, the old-established nurse of the family, was busying himself with the injured foot. He immediately declared that Miss Girdlestone must not think of disturbing her present recumbent position; he would not take upon him to answer for the consequences if she made any such rash movement. With wonderful unanimity, therefore, they both agreed that to undertake a ten miles' drive, even in the easiest possible carriage (for the patriarch's own chariot had been offered to supply the place of the Seabrights' disabled phaeton), even with the accommodation of a feather bed, and every appliance for safety and comfort, a ten miles' drive that day would be a step little short of madness.

"And perhaps one night's rest may quite restore me—and you will not mind my burthening you with my company for those few hours, ma'am? You and Miss Divet are so kind, I am sure you will let me occupy this nice room just for a single night?" it was spoken very politely, but, as Phebe thought, with something of the manner of a princess who, seeing herself thrust unavoidably into unaccustomed society, resolves in the most gracious way in the world to make use of the good folks about her, and have entirely her own way. As for Mrs. George, she was growing much too sensitive to the grand difficulties of her position, to let minor grievances move her to anger; but ere she had time to reply, the professional oracle broke in with—"I am afraid we must not flatter ourselves with reducing such a sprain as this quite so quickly. One night will hardly

suffice for that. But we will do all we can for it; won't we, nurse?"

"To be sure we will, Muster Moss; to be sure we will, sir! So, don't make yourself uneasy, dear; you, nor your pa neither. There's no harm done to the pretty little feet but what me and the doctor 's quite able to cure, and they'll both be a-dancing and jigging away as merry as ever in a day or two. But we must take it easy, and lie quiet till he gives us leave to get up—mustn't we, marm?"

And the portly old person, knowing the hospitable ways of that house, and the neighbourly offices for which it was well spoken of throughout the town, looked to her mistress in the fullest confidence that Kezia would cheerfully second every word she was speaking; though, in fact, mistress and maid had seldom disagreed more widely.

The doctor, too! Some adverse sprite had surely sent them old Jones's assistant instead of Anthony himself, that thorough-paced friend of the family, who could scarcely have failed interpreting her wishes as far as it was desirable he should; and might, by a hint judiciously given, have been induced to facilitate Miss Girdlestone's departure, instead of detaining her for what Kezia began to suspect might be little better than a pretence.

But unluckily, in lieu of the knowing, obsequious old mediciner, there stood "that puppy of an apprentice, ogling his patient, and ready to confirm on oath any nonsense she chose to dictate to him." Somewhat after

this fashion did Kezia regard the situation of affairs, and perhaps, on first glancing at them, her querulous reflections might not have seemed quite devoid of foundation, or strikingly unjust. Mr. Moss, though gravely enough attending to his business, seemed much in the light of an animated target, placed at the foot of Miss Girdlestone's bed to receive the soft looks she was pleased to level at him.

Not that Barbara had any vain design of captivating her doctor; she would probably have smiled even more sweetly on old Jones than upon his youthful adjutant: but she knew the arbitrary power that the young man's office in the sick-chamber conferred upon him; and that, dignified by a profession almost sacred in its character, he had full commission to pronounce sentence upon her whether to go or stay; dreading, therefore, that his sentence might be adverse to her wishes, she scrupled not to throw as much sweet persuasion as possible into her countenance and manner, whenever the subject came uuder discussion.

And Mrs. Barclay, on her part, spite of her aptitude to sneer at old Jones's assistant, felt herself thoroughly paralyzed by means of the same simple yet uncontrollable power; and all paramount as she usually was in her father's house, she now stood helpless and passive, unable to call herself mistress even of her own sleeping chamber, and forced to succumb to the dictum of a mere stripling, whom, scarcely three months ago, and when he was not yet out of his apprenticeship, she had heard severely reproached by his master for spending

his money on lollipops, and getting out of the surgery window into the back-yard to play surreptitiously at leap-frog. And yet this lad—this thing—this apology for a doctor, might, in virtue of his calling, be licensed to darken their brightest prospect, and overturn with a word the very best laid and most promising scheme that the united efforts of a clever family had ever devised, and nearly brought to pass amongst them.

She did hold forth a little—she could not help it—on the great convenience and extra size of the Divets' family coach, in case Mr. Moss *could* venture to sanction the removal of his patient—it was the only conveyance in Etheridge Mrs. George could possibly recommend for such a purpose; but the fact was, it might almost pass for an invalid carriage, having been built expressly for their aged grandfather—of course, his ninety years required the easiest possible driving.

Mr. Girdlestone looked persuadable and his daughter alarmed; but the young surgeon settled the question at once with the most provoking decision: "Oh, the carriage may be well enough," said he, "but look at the roads! Fancy Miss Girdlestone in her present state crossing Rattlestone Heath, or bumping down that break-neck hill on the other side of it! I would not have her do it for fifty pounds, would you, nurse?

"Lord bless you, Muster Moss," returned his faithful coadjutrix, "it would go nigh to be the death of her! That it would, poor dear!"

A sunny smile from the sweet lips of her patient was

the old woman's reward for seconding the doctor so ably—"I will give you as little trouble as I can, nurse," she said, "and, at all events, it shall be only for a little, a very little while"—and, looking up at her father, Miss Girdlestone repeated the words still more persuasively—"Only for a *very* little while, papa!"

He leaned over the pillow, and kissed her forehead, as if sealing some compact between themselves, the nature and importance of which each comprehended but too well.

The sisters exchanged looks, for they perceived inevitable defeat before them; and Kezia, giving Phebe a hint to resume her station as chief in attendance, glided out from a scene which had become almost too provoking to be borne with patient civility.

It was, in fact, impossible for a shrewd, experienced woman of the world, not to arrive at the conclusion already reached by Maria Palliser, that a meeting between the deaf guest and his umquhile enslaver was likely to prove most fatal to the prospects of any other soft soul having designs upon his heart, his rank, or his property; and, with all her sisterly partiality, Mrs. George could not but tremble for Phebe's chance of success, when once Miss Girdlestone should come into actual competition with her.

During the bustle and excitement of the last hour, Kezia had not had time to contemplate and appreciate properly all the disagreeable results of this most untoward accident; now they ranged themselves before her in threatening array, and, as she closed the chamber-

door behind her, her company-face was changed, poor woman! to one of deep perplexity.

It is indeed no trifle we are called upon to bear, when we find ourselves compelled, at perhaps the shortest notice, to give up for lost some scheme of base-born origin and doubtful character—something that we have coaxed into life, and petted and cherished as though it had been an infant at the breast—toiling for its maintenance—sinning for its advancement—yea, scrupling not to sully our consciences with a lie more or less, rather than it should want the clothing of flattery, or the adornment that deceit and equivocation may supply.

So acutely was this felt by old Jesse's descendant, that though, looking upon the case as every thing but desperate, she could not brook the thought of owning herself vanquished, even by a stroke so sudden and unexpected, that the most skilful professor of domestic tactics might have submitted to it without disgrace; and as she paced the gallery with a drooping head, and a step the very reverse of her usual alertness—still did she lay the finger of consideration on the lip of despondency, pondering over and over the possibility of extricating herself, and, together with herself, the snug little family conspiracy, of which she was so important a member, from this most pressing dilemma.

The course of the inferior spinner was tending straight towards the web of the oldest and greyest spider of all —that is to say, Mrs. Barclay was proceeding to the apartments of her revered grandfather; but as she passed

the passage window, where Miss Palliser was still lingering, that young lady turned suddenly upon her, and pronounced the word, "Well?" in a sharp tone of interrogation, as if she—even *she*—was inspired with some curiosity concerning the events of the day; and Kezia could not refuse to gratify an emotion so natural and proper. In a few words, therefore—for tediousness of narration was not one of her failings—Mrs. George put the Colonel's mistress in full possession of the situation of affairs in the adjoining chamber, and poured forth her complaints against blind fortune, and the Seabrights' ill-trained coach-horses, against the Girdlestones, old Jones's assistant, and even that stupid nurse Spicer, who was old enough surely to have known better!

Kezia went still a step further, and fell to inveighing, in no measured terms, against the Rev. Richard Cranston, whose arrival amongst them just then, she averred to be the most unlucky thing for poor Mr. Frere that could possibly have happened. "For I cannot help thinking," said she, "that something might have been hit upon to prevent a recurrence of this dangerous intercourse with the Girdlestones; but I foresee that all our little plans will be frustrated at once, by our having the company of this meddling man forced upon us. Not that I know any harm of him; but clergymen are all alike in this particular. Notwithstanding my respect for the profession, I must say they are universally addicted to meddling and interfering with what does not concern them. You may take it on my experience,

my dear Maria, that the system of espionage is not confined to priests of the Romish persuasion. There is plenty of that sort of thing going on in our own establishment, depend on it, and this will be a case in point: there are a hundred innocent little stratagems perfectly defensible—in fact, circumstanced as Mr. Manley is, they might be called praiseworthy—which one might venture on if he were left as usual to our care, but which become quite impracticable in the presence of this peeping, prying, officious friend of his."

Miss Palliser had again turned her eyes to the window and relapsed into silence; and Mrs. George, finding no encouragement to continue her "moan," was walking off, when a sudden thought induced her to inquire whether the other happened to know if the four o'clock train had yet arrived; "for after all," said she "it is possible this tiresome man may not come to-day."

Maria turned round as this was said, and, though the event might prove equally the destruction of her own cherished fancies with those of the despised Divets, she could not suppress the smile of bitter irony with which she pointed, by way of answer, into the street below. Kezia stepped eagerly to the window, and exclaimed in a tone of vexation, "Why, there he is, at this very moment!"

And true enough, Mr. Frere, arm-in-arm with a friend, was seen leisurely approaching the front door; the stranger, a man of slight and rather diminutive figure, attired in black. Not a shadow of doubt could

Kezia entertain but that it was indeed the clerical Marplot whom she had so much cause to dread.

Both ladies stood gloomily observing the approaching couple till they disappeared from sight, and then Mrs. George, rousing herself with a sigh that might have passed for a groan, said, "Well, I must e'en go down and make the best of it, and if all we have flattered ourselves is really over, why—it can't be helped—it can't be helped! but I only wish that little parson was two hundred miles off—that's all." Amongst the many marvellous things effected by means of steam and machinery, we here observe their power enlarging the very wishes of the human heart, or at least amplifying the terms in which those desires are expressed. Even in her own youth, Kezia would have been contented to wish her mortal enemy fifty miles apart from her; and, supposing her to have flourished in the days when her grandfather's astute brows were shaded by the lace cap of infancy—the days of slow-coaches and heavy roads—a matter of twenty might well have sufficed her; and now, behold how she is compelled to multiply the number before she can feel her safety quite ensured!

And so Mrs. George goes down to perform those duties of smiling hospitality which the occasion requires; and, however great is her secret reluctance to the task, she must prepare her simpering welcome for this odious guest—flatter his tastes, and pamper his appetites with the good things that larder and cellar afford; there is, as she says, "no help for it."

And Maria also moves on, echoing Kezia's remark as

she follows her. "All may indeed be over," she says to herself; "gone! dissolved like a vision of Paradise; but at least I will see him once more before that false girl entices him from me; once again I will meet his conscious glance, and enjoy the delicious certainty of being for a little while longer the subject of his deepest and tenderest interest."

But while Maria Palliser spake to herself the language of fear, it was not wholly in that slavish spirit that she went down to meet the idol of her heart; for the events of the last few days had inspired her with unwonted confidence both in herself and him, and she proudly demanded to what purpose it should serve that Heaven had created him so superior to other men, if he were destined to prove himself as weak and faulty as the majority of his fellows? Might it not rather be written in the book of Fate, that it should be his privilege and glory to fulfil, in all its requirements, the type and pattern of masculine perfection, being endowed with strength and firmness to rise unharmed, where other creatures of clay would sink into maudlin emotion and utter abasement?

And further than this, a soft little flattering voice kept whispering in her ear, that her disinterested love, and the full assurance of it, which Frere had so strangely acquired, might be ordained to prove to him both sword and buckler, rendering it a task comparatively easy to resist the enticements of his first love.

Animated by such reflections as these, Colonel Hussey's betrothed was seized with a desire for action,

most unusual to her, and a kind of restless longing to measure her strength against one whom she held to be as worthless as she acknowledged her to be surpassingly fair. She chafed at Kezia's deliberate movements, and pressed onward, as though the presence of Frere was to be the true battle-field between herself and the beautiful Barbara Girdlestone.

CHAPTER VII.

"MAY WE NE'ER WANT A FRIEND, OR A BOTTLE
TO GIVE HIM."

Ancient Convivial Sentiment.

MRS. GEORGE stopped at the foot of the stairs, to give some necessary orders relative to the accommodation of the new inmates so unexpectedly added to her establishment; and as Maria entered the ordinary sitting-room, into which Mr. Cranston had been introduced, that gentleman brushed past her in considerable haste, calling to a servant, who was in the hall, to know if he could speak to his mistress—"I wish most particularly to see Mrs. Barclay," he said; and when Kezia was turning to greet him with some civil speech, indicative of her extreme pleasure at receiving so dear a friend of Mr. Frere's, he interrupted her almost abruptly. His friend's description of the Divet family had been so accurate, that Cranston was troubled with no uncertainty as to the identity of the lady he was addressing, and she was precisely the person he was then desiring to encounter.

"Excuse me, madam," he hurriedly began; "but what is this I hear about Miss Girdlestone? her name is in every body's mouth—she is spoken of as dead or dying! Good Heaven! what does it mean? what has happened to her? and where is she?"

"Just as I fancied," was Kezia's internal remark, "meddling and prying and interfering the moment he sets his foot within our doors;" but she answered him with smooth propriety, that though there certainly had been an accident, yet, as usual, common report had considerably magnified it. The young lady had received some rather severe contusions, which seemed likely to lay her up for the present, but nothing of a dangerous nature, or at all likely to prove fatal.

"But am I to understand that she is here—actually now in this house?" He must of course be satisfied; but, prepossessed against such questioning, Kezia's answer was concise and dry.

"Yes, she is here! Her father was in the house at the time the accident occurred, and she of course had been brought back to him; Miss Girdlestone was now under medical treatment in Mrs. Barclay's own chamber."

"I feared as much," Mr. Cranston replied, while his brow lowered more and more; "unfortunate mischance! in every point of view most cruelly unfortunate!"

His eyes were fixed on the hall pavement as this lamentation escaped him; for he was murmuring it more to himself than his companion, though perfectly contented that it should reach her ears. Consequently, there was no chance of his perceiving the sudden gleam which lighted up the face of Kezia. His words, and still more his manner, was so encouraging that she ventured to say that, for the sake of others, at least *one* other besides Miss Girdlestone, she thought the young lady *had* better have stayed away undoubtedly—for her own

sake, poor girl!" Kezia added, putting forth a hypocritical feeler.

"Do not lament for her, madam!" was the prompt and stern rejoinder. "In all that touches her alone, there is a fine retribution plainly visible; and, if the penalty had been heavier still, Barbara Girdlestone would have deserved it to its fullest extent. But Frere, poor fellow! what has he done that he should be made the further sport of such a woman?"

"That excellent creature!" said Kezia, blandly. "Our dear, good friend! and is he still unacquainted with what has occurred, sir?"

"Yes, happily not a rumour of it has reached him, though, as we entered, he observed upon the disturbed appearance of the street. But I made it my particular request that it should be kept from him—for the present, at least; and your venerable grandfather, Mrs. Barclay"—here Mr. Cranston motioned towards the parlour he had just quitted—"old Mr. Divet, was kindly anxious that my first meeting with poor Frere should not be embittered by the introduction of a subject that must necessarily affect his equanimity very painfully—to say the least of it. And yet how fortunate it may prove that I should be here just now—a crisis that might have been so dangerous—so fatal to him! Providential, surely!"

Each sentence uttered by the young rector went towards the raising Kezia's spirits; but, scarcely certain yet of the ground she occupied, she still left the initiative to her friend, as she began really to esteem him. And

what a friend he might indeed be reckoned—how invaluable—supposing her able to move the quick-eared Richard Cranston as easily as she could work upon his deaf comrade! "You remind me," said she, "of what I was saying to Druce (a confidential and most attached servant of our friend, Mr. Cranston—for, as you well know, nobody can be about Mr. Frere's person without becoming warmly attached to him), and I was saying to Druce, that I should be very loath indeed to allow his master to get sight of this young lady, unless he were carefully prepared for the meeting. You know him best, of course; but for my own part, my dear sir, I would not answer for the effect that such a shock might have upon him!"

"He must *not* see her, madam!" replied Cranston with a stern decision, that caused Kezia's heart to leap for joy. "If possible, he must not know that she is in the house. Through *my* means he shall certainly not be exposed either to the pain or the temptation which such knowledge would infallibly bring with it."

"Ah! but how can we prevent his knowing it, Mr. Cranston?" said Kezia, looking him innocently in the face. "Mr. Manley, with his quick penetration and fine capacity, is not the character to be played upon; I am sure I could not attempt such a thing without good assistance—I should fail to a certainty. Indeed, we are all such sad hands at any thing bearing the aspect of deceit or double-dealing, that I believe there is not one of the name, or who has ever borne the name, of Divet,

that would not bungle at even a pious friend—even a pious fraud, Mr. Cranston."

"Leave it all to me, my dear Mrs. Barclay," said Cranston with cheerful assurance—"I honour you for your scrupulous delicacy, but am totally free from any myself."

"Ah, Mr. Cranston, but how difficult it is to attempt deceiving those we respect!" said Kezia, still harping on the string she had already twanged to such good account.

"Yes, yes!" he replied, with hasty warmth. "I understand your feelings; they are natural and proper. *You* have not been the bosom friend of Manley Frere from childhood up to the present hour. He is not to *you* as your own soul—dearer than the nearest relation you have on earth, and his welfare more sacred to you than your own individual interests. But I—to whom he is all this—am I to stand tamely by, and see his happiness sacrificed to the caprice of a heartless jilt like Barbara Girdlestone? For, after what has already passed, she can have but one purpose in coming hither—that of making him a second time her sport and pastime. And as even the firmest of us are poor creatures where your sex is concerned, madam, I would not answer for the stability of my friend any more than I would for my own consistency, if I were tried and left to the tempter and to my own weak nature. And the fact is," he added, "if you were as thoroughly acquainted as myself with the peculiar circumstances which are deciding my conduct, even you and your excellent family, frank and upright as you

are, would, I am confident, acquiesce in the propriety of a little friendly concealment, for I will not call it artifice."

Nor did Kezia call it by such a bad name, nor accuse Mr. Cranston now of any thing Romish or Jesuitical; but when he ended by saying, that he would take upon himself the entire responsibility of the course he was recommending, she humbly answered that *then* her conscience would be quite easy; "and you may safely reckon upon our all doing our best, from my dear old grandfather downwards to the faithful Druce, Mr. Cranston, to second your endeavours to succour our interesting friend. And I am sure, as you justly remark, we cannot too highly estimate the goodness of the Power which guides our steps, and illuminates our understanding, in sending you to him and to us when your assistance is so greatly needed."

Saying which gracious words, this worthy descendant of old Jesse's extended the right hand of fellowship to her unexpected coadjutor, with such a frank and cordial smile, that a more suspicious person than Cranston would have found it irresistible.

In this way it often chances that, in the dimness of their finite perception, our friends turn traitors to us, and they that love us best league with the selfish and designing to lay us in the dust; doing, with hearts full of truth and loyalty, such things as may cause us hereafter to curse the hour which gave us birth. Never in all his experience had Richard Cranston felt less distrust of his companions, or been more perfectly satisfied with

himself, and the course he was adopting, than at the moment he joined hands with Kezia Barclay. It may reasonably be questioned how far his frank nature would, under any circumstances, have proved a fitting match for those with whom he had become associated; but now it is certain that all his care and circumspection—all his fears and suspicions—were directed towards such a totally opposite quarter, that he had not a grain of them to bestow upon the Divets. This startling reappearance of Barbara Girdlestone, occurring so immediately at the time that he was also arriving at the scene of action, was hailed by Cranston as the cause, above all others, for which his journey to Etheridge had been ordained.

The friendly Divets, with all their zeal to be of service to Frere, would never have ventured on the bold measures he saw himself justified in adopting. Even had the propriety occurred to them of concealing Miss Girdlestone's arrival, the honest, straightforward character of this family would probably have interfered to prevent their acting upon their internal convictions. They would hardly, situated as they were with the son of their old patron, have liked to incur the imputation of "managing" this deaf guest of theirs. And so Frere would have been allowed to fall in again with the cold-hearted Barbara; and, whatever had been the upshot of their renewed intercourse, Cranston felt certain that it would have ended in his giving up all thoughts of becoming the husband of Phebe Divet. Even in the brief time they had been together, walking from the railway station, he had noticed an expression of his friend's strongly in-

dicative of the hold Miss Girdlestone still kept upon his memory, if not actually upon his heart.

Cranston, anxious to assure him how warmly he approved the drift and argument of his last letter to Sheen, had seized the first available moment to enter upon the subject which called him to Etheridge; and embodying, as it might be, in one brief sentence his appreciation of the interesting young person who had bestowed her unsolicited affection upon his friend, had declared that he had felt already for Phebe Divet "the regard of a brother." But, instead of accepting the remark in the sanguine spirit with which it was tendered, Frere read it with an expression of pain, as something that revolted against his taste and feelings, and immediately erasing it from his tablets, said—"Two years ago you used, I well remember, those very words in allusion to another—let me beg of you, Cranston, never to repeat them; not even in reference to one who may possibly be my future wife."

In truth, the arrival of this cherished friend did not dispose Mr. Frere to look with a brighter eye upon the world at large, or the circumstances which seemed likely to influence his own destiny. The sight of Cranston had brought back (he knew it would, and therefore it was that he had shunned it so long) that old world which it was now his interest to forget. Many an aching thought came pressing upon him, which had lain quiet enough while the faces of new friends only were clustering around him; and his vision was confined to the

acquaintanceships which had been formed since the bereavement of his hearing.

He had expected to suffer much from this meeting, and had had many a misgiving since his summons had been despatched; but, after all, the reality exceeded his melancholy forebodings. The Divets, much as he liked them, were comparatively strangers to him; their voices or their pleasant laughter had never sounded in his ears, and he was contented to commence with them in the ways the deaf must resort to. But Cranston, that most intimate of all his former associates—whose intercourse pervaded so many periods of the gay and happy youth, now blighted—Cranston, without his well-remembered voice, seemed only as the animated picture, the automaton, of his dear old friend; and once again there came upon poor Frere that wearying of the spirit which he had hoped to have outlived—that eager, intense craving to hear, if only for the duration of a second—if it were but a sentence or a word!

He repented having sent for Richard Cranston; for, in their short walk to the mansion, he seemed to himself to live over again all the pain and the strong feeling of desolation which this miserable deprivation had brought upon him. His eyes resumed the wistful look they had almost learned to lay aside, and he felt irritated and almost angered at being condemned to the usual modes of communication, which, with his newer friends, he was contented and even grateful to adopt. It seemed as if with this old companion—his double, and second self—there should be some fresh and untried method of con-

veying his thoughts, something that should at least be peculiar to them both. "Surely—surely Dick Cranston ought to be intelligible to Manley Frere, though all the world beside were slow and stupid!" Yet it was now his fate to be vexed—tortured with the impression that they were the farthest apart of all—that this oldest and most zealous of his friends was slower of communicating with the deaf man than any one else. Afterwards he understood that their very eagerness to converse must, till they were better accustomed to the altered character of their interview, cause it to seem tardier than usual; but he would not reason so at first. And then, in addition to these causes of bitter annoyance, Mr. Frere felt humbled and disappointed at finding how insufficient all his efforts at resignation had proved. What was all his internal strife, and his attempts at self-conquest—what were they worth? To what end his reflections and philosophizing, if they were so inadequate to stem this agony and torrent of vain repining? Now it happened that, in the spirit of confusion and cross purposes that seemed to govern affairs at the Etheridge mansion-house just about this time, there was not one of its inmates whom Frere was inclined in anywise to make the confidant of his feelings except Miss Palliser. He paused not to institute invidious comparisons, nor indeed did it enter his mind to reason at all upon the subject; but from his choice of an indulgent auditor, he must have felt that there was a more complete sympathy, and a deeper comprehension of him and his trials, lying hidden under the earnest brows of the Colonel's mistress, than played on

the glittering surface of Phebe Divet's bead-like eyes. Strange, perhaps, that it should be so—that, half resolved to make the one his wife, he should yet have higher satisfaction in holding rational converse with the intended wife of another! But such discrepancies in thought and action will happen occasionally to the wisest and best-conducted of mankind.

To Maria herself there seemed little that was inconsistent in this—though much that was delightful. She was fast attaining that height of self-deception, from whence the attentions of Frere must be regarded as the most natural thing that could happen to her—the more exclusive, in fact, the *more* natural; and when, in her proud assurance of being secretly preferred, she could almost defy the beautiful patient in Kezia's chamber, or that vision of Colonel Hussey—whose countenance, sad and reproachful, so often at these times would seem to be fixing its eyes upon her from over the shoulder of Mr. Frere—she began to believe that she had over-estimated the influence of the one great obstacle to her happiness, and that the other was becoming more indistinct every hour, and its frown more shadowy and fainter, amidst the sunshine that was encircling her; and even when that mischievous little dog, that had been the origin of so much excitement, such changes of feeling and condition, the promoter of all this fear and overwhelming confusion—this shame, suspense, remorse, and rapture—passions so combined that she hardly knew which most predominated—when that unconscious delinquent himself came bounding into the room, inviting the notice

of the company, Maria's nerves were scarcely shaken; "for," as she reasoned with herself, "who could tell what real good the little creature might not have done to her, to his dear master, to the poor Colonel more than all, who would some day be brought to bestow his benediction on any thing, biped or quadruped, which had saved him from uniting himself to a woman without a heart?"

Her equanimity was put more decidedly to the proof when Mr. Cranston, who had previously entered the room, and was now conversing with the family, turned at the approach of the little favourite, and directing a quick, peculiar glance at Frere, said—"Mr. Shako, I presume?" forgetting at the moment that the words could not reach him for whom they were especially intended. But the look seemed quite enough; and, as his friend bent down to caress the dog, he returned it with one full as significant, and recalling distinctly to Maria's memory a scene of dire confusion and dismay, which she would fain have had less vividly depicted there.

From this it was apparent that the young clergyman had been informed of the adventure in which Shako had played so material a part, and that he was as usual the depository of his master's sentiments. Maria's secret was revealed to one more besides Frere and Lucy Ainsworth—and that one a man, and a stranger! But while this conviction caused her to shrink from the eyes of the visiter, and to fancy those eyes directed her way much oftener than they really were, it served to

strengthen the lamentable delusion in which she had become involved. So far rightly penetrating the motives of the two friends, she felt persuaded (and the suspicion was not new to her) that the discovery of the letter, and the interest arising from that strange adventure, had been the chief if not sole cause of Mr. Cranston's sudden arrival at Etheridge. She knew so well the high regard in which Frere held the young rector, that she could easily suppose, that, if meditating one of the most important measures in the life of man, he would be loath to execute it without the advice of this valued friend.

Then her imagination marched a step farther; and she thought it probable that Cranston might be wanted in another capacity than as a passive confidant. It seemed the most likely thing in the world that Frere would look to him for assistance in that part of the affair which demanded such especial tact and delicacy in its management—that is to say, the mediation with Colonel Hussey, in which Mr. Frere himself, the successful though most innocent rival, could hardly move without an awkwardness that must be felt by all parties, and would naturally increase the Colonel's sense of ill-usage and mortification. Mr. Cranston's profession, high character, and intimate connection with Frere, marked him at once for the person best calculated to negotiate under circumstances as little offensive to the luckless Colonel as could possibly be imagined.

This view of the subject, besides, accounted satisfactorily for something which had struck Maria as ques-

tionable in the order of events, and forced upon her that very morning some painful misgivings; viz., the receipt of a letter from Colonel Hussey, containing, not as she had fervently though nervously hoped, the reproaches of an injured suitor rejected at the eleventh hour, and a formal renunciation of his claim upon her hand, but written in his usual language of contentment and affection, accompanied, indeed, with such constant allusions to the ceremony he presumed to be near at hand, and to their future married life, that she had been prevented by very shame from finishing the epistle—too touching an evidence of his confiding trust, and her consummate falsehood.

Now, however, it seemed plain to her that this enlightenment was merely deferred till Cranston's counsel could be taken, and his services secured. And while, for the sake of common honesty, she wished the secret already divulged, she could not deny the prudence and consideration which dictated so evidently a short postponement of the necessary explanation.

It was understood that Mr. Cranston's stay at the mansion would be very brief—too circumscribed, in fact, to allow of his being made useful in the matter of the out-of-town dinner-party, and the Archdeacon. "Doubtless—for *could* there be any doubt of it?—he would from thence proceed direct to Woolwich, and then——" but from that stage of the supposed transaction the imagination of the betrothed lady was apt to recoil, and she preferred contemplating things in the gross rather than the detail.

A present pang it would have cost her; but surely the pain had been well incurred, could this infatuated Maria have rightly interpreted the glances, few and guarded, yet perfectly intelligible to each other, which passed between the young men as Phebe Divet made her entrance on the boards of this little private theatre; for as such, in common with many another parlour in the house of many another quiet family, we must be allowed to designate the breakfast-room in the Etheridge mansion. But here she was as obtuse of perception as Frere was cautious of exciting suspicion, and hints that might have been useful were all neglected.

Prepossessed as Cranston was in favour of Miss Divet, his first impressions of her were *not* the happiest in the world; for she, being still ignorant of the fortunate turn affairs were taking on the ground-floor, omitted to smooth down immediately those traces of anxiety and discontent which the contemplation of events up-stairs had impressed upon her countenance, and such emotions were very far from being becoming to Frere's shepherdess. That wrinkled line across the forehead, and the two angry spots upon the cheeks, were not what Cranston had been taught to expect; and for a moment or two his resolution faltered, and Phebe's fate hung trembling in a very doubtful balance. "*This* the successor to Barbara Girdlestone! *This* the mistress of Old Court!" he had nearly added—"Forbid it all ye powers of consistency, pride, and good taste!"

Yet his disappointment was transitory, and began subsiding as soon as the "pet lamb" recovered its equani-

mity; and especially when Phebe came in immediate contact with Frere, and Cranston saw with what simple grace and ingenuity she contrived to parley with him—having herself devised many a pretty sign and quaint gesture to enlighten the deaf guest, distinct from the ordinary play of the fingers; her little feet becoming almost as expressive as her hands, tapping the floor in this or that direction, and executing a hundred pretty *pirouettes*, of which the precise meaning was known only to themselves—when he saw her thus, with the elegance of an accomplished dancer, and yet with all the seeming innocence and unconsciousness of childhood—smiling, fluttering, cooing as it were in the path of poor Frere, and remarked how pleasantly he yielded to her advances, and lost the careworn countenance, the sight of which had gone to Richard Cranston's faithful heart; so far from marvelling any longer at the partiality which had painted her in such pleasing colours, his surprise was all turned against himself and his own arrant stupidity, in failing to discover, at the very first encounter with this engaging person, that she was the being most fitted in the world to be the devoted companion and sweetest of all playfellows—the solace, delight, and helpmate of the unfortunate Manley Frere.

Relieved from every lingering scruple, and with all his strongest prejudices marshalled on the side of Phebe Divet, Cranston grew more anxious than ever that no conflicting interest or foreign influence should interfere, and tempt Frere to show himself wanting in gratitude to the fair lady who had chosen him, or to the divine

favour which, in its benignant care of him, had betrayed the sweet secret of her preference.

His endeavours towards this end were, in the first instance at least, of the simplest kind, and in strict accordance with the original sincerity of his own character, being confined merely to the keeping Frere in continued ignorance of Miss Girdlestone's accident, and —more than all things else—of her present occupancy of an upper chamber in the Etheridge mansion. These agitating facts kept concealed, and every allusion carefully suppressed that might tend to divert his thoughts and purposes from the wholesome track they were now pursuing, Cranston had little doubt that his just representations and warm encouragement would soon achieve the rest, and secure the happiness of a couple so evidently created to be the comfort of each other's lives. If, in the sequel, we find the Rector of Sheen deviating any further than this from the straight line of integrity in his dealings with his old schoolfellow, we must remember how invariable is the rule in cases of cabal, whether carried forward on a great or a petty scale —for the overturn of a government or the advancement of a private individual—that the purest and best-intentioned among the confederates submit to the leading of an unworthy majority.

CHAPTER V.

"WILL YOU COME INTO MY PARLOUR, YOU SIMPLE LITTLE FLY?"

Quoted from memory concerning an ancient Spider who invited an acquaintance into his private apartment.

And now the Divets' apprehensions of Mr. Cranston being quieted by his turning out a docile ally—not to say a willing tool—in place of the spy and informer they had pictured him to be, they had time to conside the minor difficulties which threatened them still, and of these the most prominent seemed to be the management of Mr. Girdlestone. Those who had heard his lamentation when he believed his daughter to be dying, suspected he was not likely to prove a very obstinate antagonist; but having in the first instance made this unlucky journey, expressly as a visiter, to the deaf guest, there was reason to conclude that he would shortly be prosecuting this intention; so, to prevent his entertaining it further, either for the present or any future period while lingering at Etheridge, it was proposed to consign him quietly into the hands of the Patriarch—by him to be talked over and cajoled, flattered and mystified, as might seem best and most conducive to the furtherance of the "great cause." As soon, therefore, as that gentleman descended from his daughter's chamber, Divet took care to throw himself in his way;

and, intercepting further progress towards the room of common resort, delivered a respectful message from old Jesse. "My venerable parent, whose advanced age makes it irksome to him to seek the society of his friends, would take it as a great favour—a real obligation, Mr. Girdlestone—if you would take the trouble to look in upon him in his own parlour? Every body humours the old gentleman, he is such a general favourite. In fact, he is a sort of celebrity—Etheridge is quite proud of my father; he is one of its lions, you know. He is very anxious to make personal inquiries after Miss Girdlestone, and have your report of her from your own lips, if your recent agitation will allow of your indulging him with a little conversation. This way, if you please; this is the quarter of the house that we appropriate to our good Patriarch—to the left, if you please, sir: allow me to open the door." In this manner David bustled forward, gently but determinately urging his visiter, who, fatigued by the morning's disasters, would rather have betaken himself immediately to the unrestricted freedom of an inn; and, indeed, only restrained the inclination for fear of affronting the Divets, "those civil, decent people, who were put to so much trouble on his account."

And well it became Mr. Girdlestone to feel grateful to a family so kindly disposed, so desirous to lighten all his difficulties, and save him from all possible trouble. Mentioning his intention of communicating with the Seabrights' servants previous to their return home, and his anxiety to ascertain the mischief their master's pro-

perty had sustained, he was informed that the coachman's hurts had been properly looked to, and that he and the groom were at that moment regaling themselves in the servants' hall; and when they had been duly refreshed, and had received Mr. Girdlestone's commands, there would be a couple of nags, quite at their service, to carry them back to Langton. As for Mr. Seabright's horses, they should be well cared for as long as they remained in the stables of the manor-house; and the injured carriage should have been brought to their own premises also, if it had not seemed more advisable, in its disabled condition, to place it at once in the hands of the Etheridge coach-maker, a very clever workman, whom they could conscientiously recommend. At his leisure and convenience, Mr. Girdlestone might himself look in and certify the amount of the damage it had undergone—all which arrangements were laid down in such smooth and easy language, that even the punctilious guest, while perfectly sensible of the obligations he was incurring, could not regard them as oppressive.

Doubtless he fancied—good, easy man!—that when these civilities and acknowledgments had duly passed between himself and his entertainers, that the chief purpose of his visit to old Jesse was accomplished; but by the Divets it was held as mere prefatory matter, wholly and entirely distinct from the real subject they had in view.

Nothing could be further from the intentions of Miss Girdlestone's father, when he seated himself by old

Divet's easy-chair, than the making unnecessary revelations concerning his own or his daughter's affairs; and against the attacks, whether open or insidious, of some of the household, he might have stood proof—for though weak, he was not a silly person; but given over into the hands of the grandsire, he was even as clay in those of the potter. For who could venture to impute to such a reverend conglomeration of wrinkles and crowsfoot, faltering on the extremest verge of life, any of those paltry passions and lower propensities which agitate the spring and summer of humanity? The apparently careless question, or leading remark, which might, some twenty years ago, have seemed the mere result of idle or impertinent curiosity, were now received with simple faith, as demonstrating the universal charity, the boundless benevolence, with which the hoary ancestor of a respectable line surveyed all humanity, and embraced every rank and condition, the rich together with the poor, of his fellow-creatures, in the warm folds of his genial sympathy.

Very shortly, therefore, did the Divets contrive to ascertain all that it was important to them to know as to the Girdlestones' motives in attempting to open a communication with Manley Frere, so likely to be dangerous to, if not actually subversive, of their own schemes: and, observing the nervous dread with which Mr. Girdlestone looked forward to a meeting with his daughter's ill-used lover, they exerted their utmost skill in fostering all his weak apprehensions, and inspiring him with a rooted conviction of Frere's implacable feel-

ings, and the uselessness of attempting any thing in the shape of reconciliation.

As on occasions like these, however, actual assertion should if possible be avoided, the delicacy of their tact (especially on the part of the old man) was manifested, in implying all they wanted to express without any dangerous compromise of their own veracity.

Thus, they well remembered that, during the whole of his residence at the mansion, Mr. Frere had never been heard to pronounce the name of Girdlestone, or make the most remote allusion to the circumstances which had broken off his connection with that family; so that, when their simple-minded dupe asked whether the deaf guest often spoke to them on this painful subject, —"Does he *frequently* allude to us, Mr. Divet?"—the old gentleman, affecting to hesitate, replied, "W—e—ll, w—e—ll, we will not assert that he mentions names, poor young fellow! I should not say that he was in the habit of particularizing any individual of your family by name—eh, David? Not by name, I think, my son?"

"Why, no, sir; not exactly perhaps by name. But there *is* a way, Mr. Girdlestone!"

"Precisely so," the old man went on, taking the word out of his son's mouth. "There is a way, as you observe, David—a method, Mr. Girdlestone, of expressing something deeper than words can convey. It is by the tenor of a man's reflections upon passing events, and his ordinary course of thought and opinion, that we are enabled most truly to discern his inmost feelings—

the dangerous nature of his secret contemplations—and to estimate all the bitter, unwholesome fermentation that is proceeding within," and here he sighed mournfully.

"You think, then, that it would only serve towards a renewal of old grievances, a ripping up of old wounds, if either I or my daughter were the first to make advances?"

"Frankly, sir, if I must tell you my candid opinion," old Jesse continued in his slow and emphatic way, "it is my belief that—if you would desire (as I think you would, Mr. Girdlestone) to preserve a pleasant, charitable impression of our poor stricken friend—you had better shun his company; keep out of his way on all occasions, my good sir; it will be in fact best for you both."

Mr. Girdlestone looked from the old man to David, who perfectly concurred in his sire's opinion, and even prophesied some scandalous outbreak in case of his meeting with Frere. "I don't know what you may think, Mr. Girdlestone, but I confess I have a great dislike to scenes; I have an Englishman's horror of them. Nasty, awkward things, are these domestic fracas, agitating to the nerves, and likely to lead to very disagreeable notoriety."

"Mr. Divet, I shudder at every thing of the sort," and Mr. Girdlestone suited the action to the word as he uttered it; yet his kindly nature presently prompted the remark, that he should not once have attributed an unforgiving spirit to poor Manley Frere.

"We must own," he said, "that he has had much to

try him; and towards some of my family, especially that member of it who was most influential with her advice during that unhappy period—nay, even with regard to Barbara herself—I can understand a very sore feeling still to exist. But Frere can hardly think harshly of *me*, Mr. Divet, who was always his friend and warmest advocate; for, in fact, I was the last to acknowledge the objections which appeared so convincing to others. It was not till the case was put to me repeatedly, and in the most forcible light, that I could admit the expediency of dissolving the connection which subsisted between us. It was possible," Mr Girdlestone added, "that Mr. Frere might never have been informed of this;" and the remark being made in a tone of interrogation, old Divet caused his reply to take the form of a graceful reticence, interchanging glances with his son, as if they could have told between them a tale of fierce, undying animosity, had they not been restrained by respect for the reputation of one guest and the feelings of another.

"The truth is, my dear Mr. Girdlestone, that there are some of us poor mortals, who possess much sterling worth of character, a store of good gifts, and yet the best is wanting—that most blessed gift of all, a forgiving disposition, a gracious and forgiving soul." Saying which, with his deep-set eyes fixed mildly, but impressively, on the visiter, old Jesse waved his venerable head to and fro, somewhat after the manner of Hamlet when he shook his at poor Ophelia, thereby scaring the damsel and puzzling the commentators.

Puzzled Mr. Girdlestone was not, for it seemed to him that these judicious counsellors were plainly pointing out the path he must adopt; but the wily couple had succeeded so well in exciting his nervous apprehensions, that when Divet proposed shewing him his way up the back-stairs to his daughter's apartment, in order that, in his visits to her, he might be secure from the chance of stumbling unawares upon her cast-off lover, the offer was accepted, even with gratitude; and, bidding courteous farewell to the old man, Mr. Girdlestone accompanied his son along that quarter of the manor-house which communicated with the lower offices, taking note of all its bye-ways and intricacies of passage and stair, though not without a glance of misgiving as he turned some new corner, in the fear of still encountering that fierce and rabid animal, the deaf guest! of whose rancour against every thing bearing the name of Girdlestone, he was now so fully persuaded, that, but for his fear of agitating his daughter, he would have visited her again before he left the house, and, repeating all he had just heard, have convinced her of the mortification she was preparing for herself, if, in defiance of all advice and admonition, she should persist in seeking an interview with Frere.

Whether Mr. Girdlestone's remonstrances would have carried much weight with them, is to be doubted. His daughter's filial affection was seldom attended by much reverence for his judgment in the affairs of life; and now, in addition to the motives which had wrought on her to take this lamentable journey, there had grown

up a fanciful trust in the impelling power—the "good star," which had led her by such strange means almost into the very presence of her old suitor.

It was curious by the way to observe, how many of these samples of erring mortality, at this time brought together in the Etheridge mansion, were each, in their several ways, and according to the cast of their individual minds, claiming for themselves and their own selfish views and interests, a direct and peculiar measure of divine favour.

We have seen already in what degree Mr. Cranston, usually so wise and sincere in his humility, did on this occasion pride himself as being the instrument chosen by indulgent Heaven for the bringing about a noble and priceless benefit to his friend: and the Divets, though neither so solemn nor enthusiastic in their reflections, meant in their worldly way something of the same tenor, when they congratulated themselves, or crowed to each other, over their astonishing "good-luck," in having only such simple folks to deal with as himself, and "poor, stupid Mr. Girdlestone."

Then there was Maria Palliser, the cold, suspicious sceptic—the deliberate questioner of all things in heaven above and earth beneath—even she, so apparent to her seemed the climax up to which all things were tending—even she, therefore, was apprehending the trace of an awful and uncontrollable fate, moulding and shaping the course of her worldly career. Yea! there was to be a power specially at work for her as well as the rest, to reward, as it would seem, all her rebellious

cavillings and hard judgments of things divine and human; and spirits from worlds unknown were commissioned—specially commissioned—to promote and sanctify her infidelity, wed her to one good man, and help her to jilt another!

In like manner, the beautiful Barbara found nothing so soothing to the pangs of body and mind, as the idea of her being peculiarly the object of Heaven's care; every thing being so ordered as to bend to her will and pleasure, and be rendered subservient to the desire of her heart. Sorely that day had she felt the want of some one besides her father to encourage and support her; he had afforded the sanction of his paternal countenance to her undertaking, and had thus far been instrumental to its progress. But beyond this she had foreseen that he would be of little service to her; his presence at her side, with his eternal nerves and punctiliousness, could be only a check upon her free movements. And now she rejoiced in reflecting that this shrinking—vacillating—over-scrupulous companion was not to be her sole dependence, but that the tools and ministers of the special favour accorded to her, were to be (no doubt) these worthy Divets, amongst whom a visible providence had thrust her, as it were, by means neither to be foreseen nor controlled.

Here, one bold stroke had placed her; she was suffering, it was true, and was forbidden all efforts of locomotion, yet she was surrounded by kind faces, soothed by friendly voices, and, shortly as she had known them, she was feeling that this household of strangers was

already knitted to her by ties of more than common interest,—those holy relations which the sick and suffering, and those that are pining in health or spirits bear to the charitable souls who tend them in their need.

With just the same gentle arrogance, and consciousness of superiority, which inspired the father in his association with the lawyer's family, did the daughter accept the attentions which were lavished on her; and, amidst all her sweetness of manner, a very keen observer might possibly have detected a slight—a very slight—shade of condescension in the tone in which the lovely patient expressed her grateful acknowledgments in return. Considered simply in the character of good Christians, the people about her, from the daughter of the house down to the domestics employed in fulfilling the behests of Mr. Jones and his assistant, must all be ready and willing to assist her; while, as the family and servants of old Mr. Frere's agent and steward, and all that kind of thing, it stood equally as a matter of course that they would hold themselves honoured and gratified in the task; and she no more dreamed of any one of them having a will opposed to hers, than could be contemplated in the possibility of the soft and pliant pillows which they had heaped up for her accommodation, refusing to be patted and poked, compressed on this side, or expanded on that, as might best conduce to her comfort and convenience.

So when the day advanced, and she found herself growing more and more at home in her new lodging, and these chance acquaintances assuming quite the

aspect of honest old friends, to whom she might safely tell any thing, and take whatever trifling liberties she pleased—Barbara confided to the sisters, and that with scarcely a hesitation, her great desire to see Mr. Frere, bidding them go and ask him—nay, entreat him (if it were necessary)—to come to her.

"Of course," she said, "he knows what has happened to me, and will not wonder at being brought here to see me; but if he should betray much reluctance, which it is possible he may, to our meeting, tell him that I ask it as a favour, not as a right, and impress upon him the shock I have sustained—that fearful accident, and all I am suffering; and tell him—in short, you *must* bring him to me, or I shall have no peace or tranquillity, and I shall not be able to close my eyes all night, and that will make me restless and feverish, and cross and disagreeable, and, instead of getting rid of your troublesome patient to-morrow, I shall get very bad, and you will have to nurse me a great while longer." She spoke this with a touch of playfulness, which shewed how infinitely fascinating she must be in her hours of happiness; but then, checking herself and raising her eyes mournfully to Kezia, she added, "and perhaps—ah! who knows, ma'm? but I may die in your hands after all! That which people call a broken heart, what can it mean but that the spirit, by long chafing, wears out the flesh at last, and mine has been *such* an existence of late."

Mrs. George could scarcely do otherwise than accede, in all appearance, to what was required of her; yet with a touch of humane compunction for the disappointment

she meditated inflicting, hinted at the possibility of a failure in her proposed negotiation. Miss Girdlestone might safely trust her with any commission, especially any thing in which the interests of their dear Mr. Manley were involved—here the pet lamb was afflicted with a little cough. "But persons visited with that sad bereavement of his, were known to be so very firm in their prejudices—in fact, to give it its real name, *so* obstinate. Therefore you see, my love, I must go quietly and cautiously to work with our dear good friend. These men, Miss Girdlestone, these lords and masters of ours, are determined creatures when they once take it into their heads to speak that little monosyllable No."

"Yes," Barbara replied, blushing between anxiety and the natural shyness of a delicate girl whispering her dearest concerns in a strange ear. "Yes, that is all true; but I think, ma'am, if you tell Mr. Frere just what I have said to you, of my great desire to see him once before he leaves the country, and add to it whatever persuasions your own kind heart will dictate in such a case—I am not asking much of him—only five minutes, that I may speak a few—a very few—words in openness and sincerity."

"You will have to write them down, you know, dear, or speak them very loud," said Phebe, with the glance of a basilisk.

"Ah! yes, I remember," the other replied, recoiling slightly; but the next moment, taking courage again, she repeated more cheerfully, "only bring us together, face to face, dear Mrs. Barclay, and there is no fear but we

shall understand each other"—a bold and dashing sentiment, which Phebe failed not highly to applaud; for she had a cruel delight in the deception she was practising, and did all she could to encourage the false hopes of her rival, to the end that her disappointment might be the more complete.

CHAPTER VI.

HOPE DEFERRED.

Maria Palliser guessed there was mischief of some sort brewing between the female Divets, when, passing in the dircction of Miss Girdlestone's chamber, she observed the sisters conferring near the door, and saw the expression of fierce glee in the countenance of the younger, and the half-reluctant, deprecating smile with which Kezia parted from her.

Phebe, perceiving Miss Palliser passing the head of the stairs, gave her a sign to follow her back to the room she had just quitted; nor would Maria have required more solicitation than that silent inclination of the head and hand—for she was glowing with desire to know from the evidence of her own senses, the sort of person it had been—the voice, the manner, and address—that had once possessed such influence over the mind and fancy of Manley Frere. But, together with the beckon of Phebe's finger, there came a look which, to Maria's imagination, had so little in it of the woman, and so very much of the fiend, that it caused her a moment's hesitation. Once more experiencing the proud aversion she had so often felt at being associated with the lawyer's family,

and supposed, even by themselves, to be partaking their base schemes and selfish devices—their triumph and heartless derision.

It was a fact undeniable, that the betrothed lady nurtured a very formidable crop of evil passions in her own breast; but these had little in common with the propensities which prevailed and revelled within the fair bosom of Frere's shepherdess. The demon which possessed Maria, had more of the fallen angel in its nature than characterized the malevolent earth-born imp of darkness, that had wound itself into the very heart of the little Divet.

It came to pass, therefore, when at length they stood together by the bedside of poor Barbara, that Miss Palliser's loftier mind was free from the personal envy which gave peculiar poignancy to Phebe's hatred. She had no desire to question or depreciate the outward and merely superficial advantages of their mutual rival; on the contrary, it impressed her with a still higher respect for Mr. Frere, to find that, if his judgment had been to blame when he chose the inconstant beauty, the most fastidious critic could not impugn his taste.

And so, having uttered the few commonplace condolences which custom required on her introduction to Miss Girdlestone, Maria remained looking down upon her with the cold and careful eye with which a picture-dealer examines and estimates some prodigy of form and colouring at exactly the value it will fetch in the market, neither adding to nor diminishing ought from the praise and the price it may legally claim. It was not

the fine goldsmith's work, and the chasing of the casket in which the jewel was held, that she sought to injure or tarnish even with a passing breath, but the treasure itself—even the immortal soul which lay imprisoned in that goodly shrine! It was *that* Maria scrutinized with still deeper and keener attention, and triumphed with most unholy exultation when she discovered a flaw; for she said to herself, "I am worthier of him than thou!"

And now, in pursuance of her heartless sport, and in the engagement of a secret triumph which had not in her case one palliating circumstance to excuse or make it less detestable, Phebe Divet was putting the room in order, as if for the reception of a visiter, momentarily expected; dressing out the toilette-table afresh, drawing aside the window-curtains, and disposing those of the bed so as to throw a becoming shade around the fair form which reposed beneath them. Miss Divet showed herself an adept at such contrivances for heightening effect, and Barbara's looks followed her gratefully, and with a sort of indolent amusement, as she watched the light figure of the little girl moving so busily about the chamber, and intent, to all appearance, on doing her true and faithful service.

The preparations were completed by throwing an Indian shawl of Mrs. Barclay's over the least attractive portion of the tableau—the disabled feet, and the fomentations which were being continually applied to them; and Phebe whispered Miss Girdlestone, with her pretty arch smile, that she should like to cover up old Spicer,

the operator, also, for truly she was no ornament to the room.

The patient returned Phebe's smile with languid sweetness, and told her she would not say a syllable against the "good old thing," if she were deriving as much relief from her kind offices. "As I lie here so helpless and forlorn," she continued, "I love to think of her as one of those good, homely Sisters of Charity one meets with abroad."

"I hope we all appear to you in that light," returned Phebe with a fawning voice, but a glance that Maria could best interpret—"Sisters of M-er-cy, you know, as we call such things in this country."

"Oh no! my dear Miss Divet," the other replied; "you belong to the higher order of ministering spirits, that flit lightly and gracefully about a sick-bed, doing a world of good besides the manual occupation. While nurse is curing my poor shattered feet, you are bringing balm to my heart; there is such hope and animation in every feature of your bright, cheerful face—your very step has encouragement in it. No, no!"—smiling more brightly herself—"cover up that frightful old doctor that was here just now; extinguish *him* in an avalanche of shawls, and I will not say a word to beg him off!"

"You like the young one best, d-e-a-r?" Phebe suggested, with a touch of her grandfather's sarcastic drawl.

"A great deal the best!" was the quiet reply. "I can do just as I like with him; besides, he is not quite such a blot upon the scenery."

At this a sneer passed across Miss Palliser's lip, which

it was well that the petted beauty did not happen to remark—she was listening to the croaking voice of old Spicer, who, professionally interested in the looks of her patient, was recommending that she should be accommodated with a cap. "For her part, she did not like to see people lying in bed without one; it warn't snug, and it warn't decent. If you could only see your hair, Miss Girdlestone!"

"Is it so very objectionable, nurse? Well, bring me the looking-glass, and I will see what can be done to it. There are times and seasons short of death, Phebe, when, as Pope says, 'One would not sure look frightful!'"

"Lawk! did the Pope say that, Miss Girdlestone?"

"Don't be a goose, Spicer, but look out and see if any one is coming," so said Phebe; and, while the old woman obeyed her, she whispered to her victim that, if any body could discern a fault in their charming invalid, it would not be the person she was expecting to visit her.

Maria scarcely distinguished the words; but, knowing all she did, there was something so revolting to her in Phebe's flattering tone, and the credulous pleasure with which it was listened to, that for a moment or two she felt tempted to unmask and defeat her. But the generous impulse soon passed away, Miss Girdlestone herself labouring, all unconsciously, to dispel it.

Old nurse came back, of course unsuccessful, but as ready as Miss Capulet's own attendant to cheer the young lady with delusive hopes—"I don't hear no one on the move just now; but you keep up your spirits, dear.

He'll be sure to come at last; no fear of that, Miss Girdlestone!"

Mr. Frere's ill success in love was a story well known to the whole household, and pity for the deaf gentleman had hitherto gone hand in hand with the most just indignation at the lady who had jilted him. But it was only while unacquainted with Miss Girdlestone that strict justice had been meted out; the vision of her lovely face, and the sweet persuasion which lurked in her voice and manner, had done much already to shake this high principle, and the servants admitted to the sick-room were, by this time, as eager to please the young lady, and run of her errands, as if she had been the most faithful and devoted of women.

Phebe, having again recourse to her sister's wardrobe, brought out some half-dozen caps, of various shapes and degrees of finery; and as Mrs. Barclay's style of head-dress could, under no possible circumstances, be calculated for the present occupant of her chamber, much laughter and ridicule was excited, as one by one the incongruous articles were tried on and as hastily discarded. "He would not know me in such things!" Miss Girdlestone said. "I should be as strange to him in this wilderness of blond and flowers, as he (I fear) must be to me whenever we meet. My poor, poor Manley! Oh, Miss Divet! is he really so very, *very* hard of hearing?"

"Oh dreadful, dear! But only look what I have got here; something so old and curious that it must be quite præ-Raphaelite!"

"Lawk, Miss Phebe!" said Spicer. "Why, that must

have belonged to your grandmother—your ma's ma, old Mrs. Mudge."

"Didn't I say it was something mediæval?" and Phebe, placing the mass of heavy cambric on the head of Miss Girdlestone, abused it as hideous in the highest degree, and immoral—highly immoral: such things could only lead to disobedience and contempt of our parents; for how would it be possible to honour one's father and mother if they were convicted of wearing such nightcaps as those?

Miss Palliser was next laughingly appealed to, but that young lady professed to have no opinion to give. "All that was requisite in a nightcap," she supposed, "was to cover the head, and this thing might answer the purpose as well as any other. In fact, being plainer than any of the others, she esteemed it rather fitter for the head of a reasonable creature than the load of trumpery Miss Girdlestone had been trying on."

Barbara coincided perfectly with the last speaker, for she was consulting an adviser even more indulgent; she was looking in the glass, and what she perceived there gave her such entire satisfaction, that she roundly declared this last importation from Mrs. Barclay's hoards to be the most becoming thing she had ever worn. Then, calling for a comb, she began smoothing out some of her self-curling tresses, taking care that they should fall again into the same free and natural position they had taken of their own accord, her pure and soft complexion flushing, as she thus employed herself, with the consciousness of possessing a loveliness so triumphant

that it might endure and even be heightened by an alliance with what in itself was ungainly and grotesque. She reproved Phebe for her bad taste, vowed she would have dozens and dozens of nightcaps all made on precisely the same model, and finished by turning her sweet face to the bystanders, and calling upon them all, collectively and individually, to confirm her judgment.

Then she sank back upon the heaped-up pillows, and looking again upon the glass, or rather the beautiful image it presented to her, Miss Girdlestone fell into a quieter aud more thoughtful mood.

"It is strange," she said, "how one is reminded, at the most agitating periods, of things that have long gone by, and been perhaps forgotten by every body but ourselves. I remember once our being all together looking over some old-fashioned prints—queer old things they were—portraits, with powdered hair some of them, and the most wonderful combination of absurdity by way of head-dresses; but amongst them there was a likeness. I think it was Charlotte Corday; and do you know it had just such a cap as that, with the same wide flapping border, and the hair hanging down like mine? And when they all found fault with it, and said no woman could wear such a thing without appearing frightful, *he* looked at me with such meaning in his eyes—no one could mistake it—and said he knew of only *one* who could! Strange that I should have come upon this same old fashion just now, bringing that time back so forcibly, that I seem to behold again every person who was then present, and *him*—best of all!" shaking her head a little

and looking wistfully at the glass. "But every thing that happens to me now has this remarkable character of fatality attending it. What could be more odd and eventful than my meeting you on that journey—choosing of all others that particular carriage in that particular train?"

The spirit of the pet lamb rebelled at this, and her eyes shot a dangerous glance as she answered, "Yes, dear, but don't you think it may have been almost as odd and eventful to *me* to have met *you* there?"

"Eventful to you, Miss Divet; how so?" said the other negligently.

"Oh, nurse, take care; you are hurting me a little!"

"Oh, of course I am not pretending or presuming to compare the adventures of poor little Phebe Divet with those of the distinguished Miss Girdlestone; I know my claims and position better than that, dear! But still, great things and small are so oddly mingled sometimes, and very little people and very magnificent ones are so strangely jumbled together, that I can fancy it possible that even *my* fortunes, obscure as they are, and quite unworthy a place in history, may in some way or other have been, I won't say *influenced* exactly, but—implicated—yes, that is the word, *implicated* with yours."

Notwithstanding Phebe's pretence of apologizing for this suggestion, Miss Girdlestone probably regarded it as slightly presumptuous, for she answered quietly—"Well, I don't see how they should: I am not aware of any consequences our meeting entailed upon *you*, Miss Divet, unless it was tempting you to the transgression

of putting my old friend, Mrs. Prescott, out of countenance by scoffing at her false teeth and ringlets; and perhaps that was not a very heinous offence after all—though, I assure you, she is an excellent person, spite of her little weaknesses. But now, take away the glass and the cap too, if you will; for I daresay he has long forgotten all about the old story I was telling you, and would only wonder now to see me so disguised."

"But if it has slipped his memory you can remind him of it, can't you, dear?" said Phebe. "There's nothing like stories of 'lang syne' for putting us quite at ease with an old friend, and making the time pass pleasantly. But, hush! Do be quiet, nurse: he is coming now—I am sure I hear his step along the passage"—and Phebe held her breath, and seemed to listen with uplifted finger.

Barbara, too, raised her beautiful head from the high pillows on which it had languidly sunk, and with trembling impatience fixed her eyes upon the door; and Maria, knowing the vanity of her expectations, even *she* began to pity her. It was a cruel scene, she thought, and she turned away, afraid of seeming to countenance it.

Before she could reach the door, however, the busy rustle of female attire was heard at it, and Kezia entered. Miss Girdlestone's glance shot past her—but, alas! the door closed after her. Mrs. George was quite alone, and the poor patient sank back again with such an altered countenance, as impelled still faster the retreating steps of the Colonel's mistress.

Mrs. Barclay was "*so* sorry!" nothing could be like

it. "So *very* unfortunate that they should have been *just* too late! Mr. Frere had left the house only ten minutes ago, they tell me."

"Well, then, he can't be gone far," said Spicer, "and somebody might fetch him back in a twinkling. Let me go and send Abraham—he'll run like a lamplighter!"

An expressive glance, admonishing her to hold her tongue, was all the answer the old woman obtained, and then Mrs. George craftily changed her battery.

Leaning with a gentle action over Miss Girdlestone's pillow, she whispered that there were, of course, considerations resulting from the past which their good nurse could not be supposed to understand—or to appreciate, if she did understand them. "The appearance of pursuing *any* gentleman, however close our intimacy with him may formerly have been, must be, I am sure, repugnant to the principles in which Miss Girdlestone has been brought up. Under *any* conceivable circumstances, I feel persuaded, the delicacy of *her* mind would shrink from the imputation of any thing so unbecoming the female character."

At this wily insinuation Barbara raised her eyes, now so heavy and disconsolate, so unlike what they had been but a few moments ago, and with more downright haughtiness than she had yet exhibited towards the Divets, replied, that "the only person whose opinion in this matter could influence her conduct, would be the last in the world to misinterpret it." Still Mrs. Barclay presented the same unruffled calm of superior age and experience—"Ah! I admire your spirit, my dear Miss

Girdlestone; but I am an old woman compared to you, and know how easily a young lady makes herself liable to remark if she ventures to offend against established customs and conventionalities. Generous and high-minded as your impulses may be, there is—believe me, my love—a cold-hearted world, and a busy tribe of scandal-mongers, ever ready to put the worst and most shameful construction upon the actions of the young and innocent."

And, subdued by her admirable acting, and once more confiding as heretofore, her poor patient answered her, that indeed she was well aware there were such people to be found, and she was wrong to feel hurt at Mrs. Barclay's good advice. "But surely, ma'm," she said, "the circumstances in which I am involved are too peculiar to bring suspicion on my motives. All who are acquainted with the hard measure Mr. Frere has sustained from me and my family—and I am afraid it was talked of every where!" Mrs. George mournfully assented—"Well, then, they can neither wonder at, nor surely censure, me for making the only amends I can. These are but trifling; for I have little to urge in extenuation of the past. But at least I allay my own uneasiness by entreating his full and free forgiveness before we part, perhaps never to meet again. That there are slanderers and traducers ready to fall upon us every where, I am as well convinced as you can be; but even they will remember that the man I am, as you truly say, pursuing—or persecuting, if they like the term better—was to have been my husband, and that it was my per-

versity alone, and no shadow of coldness on his side, that caused us to be sundered. I think there are few whose opinions I need value, who, knowing this, will be disposed to blame me—especially as I act, they must recollect, under my father's sanction."

In defiance of her mistress's warning finger, upheld behind Miss Girdlestone's curtain, nurse Spicer would be still intruding her consolation and advice, exhorting the pretty patient not to fret or make herself anyways uneasy:—"Mr. Frere would be sure to come back soon, and they would have him up to her in no time: she dared to say he had only stopped out with that gentleman as was come, just to show him a bit of the town before dinner. No doubt 'Muster Cranstum' would like to see the town-hall and the new institution, and such like."

The blood mounted to Miss Girdlestone's face, and she asked in a very marked tone, "Is *he* here? Is Mr Cranston come?"

Mrs. George could not avoid satisfying her on this head, but she did it reluctantly; for though her affairs seemed to be progressing with tolerable evenness and a reasonable prospect of final success, they were still in a position so hazardous, that a rash suggestion, or even a word imprudently ventured, might entail some fresh dilemma, hitherto unimagined, and consequently unprovided against. Miss Girdlestone, however, made no comment on what was told her, but putting on a thoughtful and saddened look, desisted from further discourse.

Barbara was perfectly aware that the young Rector of Sheen had ever been foremost amongst those who

had censured her for breaking her plighted troth to Frere, and she could not but apprehend that his presence at the manor-house just at this juncture boded her no good. Frere, once so placable, so merciful, as well as just, would approach her, not influenced by the kindly recollections she would fain have inspired in him, but prepossessed with the harsh prejudices and cruel insinuations of another. For as to the Divets, in whom she had hitherto trusted, kind as they were, and even anxious to serve her, their power of influencing their deaf guest must be slight indeed compared to what was enjoyed by this old and attached friend.

Until this unwelcome news we have seen her steadily refuse to share her father's misgivings, or give heed to the artful insinuations of Kezia; but from this time forth, she grew quite able to imagine that the expedition she had undertaken, in such a sanguine spirit, might terminate in disappointment and disgrace.

CHAPTER VII.

A SPARK NEAR THE POWDER MAGAZINE.

NEW troubles awaited Frere in his renewed intercourse with the friend he had known in happier times. The reluctance felt to this meeting being once overcome, he had hungered and thirsted for the moment that was to bring them together and alone, with every prying eye and inquisitive ear excluded from their neighbourhood; free to expatiate, without the shadow of reserve, on every thing which pressed upon his heart so heavily, or stirred it with such excited feelings.

Yet, now that Cranston had actually arrived, there seemed a difficulty of compassing this much desired and most intimate communion; others of the household were constantly intervening, and so much of his attention was given to them, that it seemed to Frere as if *he* was, after all, but a secondary object with his friend.

It could not be denied that he had pressed and inculcated upon him a most careful consideration of the Divets. Richard had, in fact, been summoned for no other purpose than to survey the little shepherdess and all her tribe—to examine, note down, and impartially pronounce upon her individual merits; and, with respect

to them, to ascertain their efficiency for the moulding and educating a daughter of the house, so as to render her competent to the distinguished position to which the proprietor of Old Court meditated raising her; yet, surely, so much time and attention need not have been devoted to them, to the exclusion of all other and prior claims.

Ignorant of the new and all-engrossing topic which had arisen even that very day, engrossing the general interest, and rubbing off, as it were at a single stroke, every semblance of ceremony from their intercourse; thus did Frere meditate, as he saw Cranston and the Divets assuming at once, towards each other, such an attitude of easy intimacy, and holding together such long and earnest discourse, from all which communication he, being of necessity excluded, felt himself thrown strangely into the background.

Lustily did he wrestle with his impatient spirit, and the kind of jealous discontent which began to torture him at this new proof of what he deemed his insignificance in the eyes of others. The disregard and avoidance of strangers, indeed, or of persons indifferent to him, had ceased to inflict more than a momentary pang upon his sensitive nature; but to suspect himself of being a mere cipher in the eyes of Richard Cranston—alas! what was to console him for that! "He is tired of me already!" he thought. "We have had scarcely half an hour's talk together, and he turns from me as an encumbrance and a bore. And, strange to say it, I believe I should have fared better had we been on terms of less

perfect intimacy; for then his mere sense of good-breeding would have sufficed to exact a decent display of attention from him, and, deaf as I am, I might have persuaded myself that I was still of some sort of importance to Dick Cranston;" and then Frere reproved himself for blaming another for what was imputable solely to his own unhappy condition. The incident, mortifying as it might seem, was but another of the many trials inseparable to deafness; and all he had now to do was to guard against imposing more of his uncomfortable society on his old friend than seemed to be quite welcome to him. And so, with a little pique and much resignation, he resolved, as the evening wore on, to go early to bed, and thus relieve the public at large from the presence of an unnecessary unit amongst their number.

Had Mr. Cranston caught the wistful look with which his friend lingered for a moment ere he quitted the sitting-room, his self-complacency might have sustained a salutary shock; but, under the circumstances, he contented himself with shaking his dear Manley heartily by the hand, and dismissing him to his repose with a cheerful smile.

For Frere's quick discernment had not been much misled; his friends just then were very glad to get rid of him, and his best friend gladdest of all. The fact being, that Cranston was not yet sufficiently accustomed to the new aspect in which he was surveying his old associate, to be able to mention him before his face, and discuss the most delicate matters relating to him, in the easy and unrestrained fashion which the others found no difficulty

in adopting; and especially did Cranston feel this embarrassment, now that the subject he desired to enlarge upon was one of such incalculable moment to his friend; the least hint of which, should it by any chance reach his comprehension unawares, must needs occasion such acute and painful emotion.

Now, therefore, one and all of that goodly company felt it a relief when the deaf guest had turned his back upon them; and, by way of resolving the house into a committee, and excluding not only the hard of hearing, but a few that could hear too well, David was just rising to shut the door after Frere, when a voice saluted them from the landing beyond, which, if not that of the town-crier, could belong to no one in Etheridge but Mrs. Sarah Barclay, who was that moment returned from spending the day with a friend in the suburbs.

"Going to bed so soon, Mr. Manley?" she shouted. ("Lord bless him, poor fellow!) Well, ne-ver you mind. Don't you be peak-ing and pin-ing for what can't be helped. It's a pack of rub-bish altogether (a bold, little, good-for-nothing flirt!) And don't you be afraid but it will all come right in time, and ev-er-y body will get their deserts (and if they got a rope's-end and a horse-pond it would serve them very right.) So be sure not to fuss and worret your-self about any such trumpery, Mr. Man-ley,—that's all, sir."

But, before the friendly exhortation had reached half this length, the Divets had electrified the young rector, by starting to their feet with looks of universal consternation, David exclaiming, "Good God, she'll tell him

all! Kezia, my dear, do you hear that confounded old woman? She'll tell him every thing, by Jove, before we can prevent her!" and off he bolted to the rescue. But Mrs. George, who at the first alarm was hurrying off also, thought it best to leave cousin Sally entirely to her father; while she, in her own discreet way, glossed the matter over to Mr. Cranston, whose surprise at the sudden excitement he did not attempt to conceal.

All that Kezia could do for cousin Sally and the gentility of the Divets, was to qualify her boisterous vulgarity by the convenient term "eccentricity," which is indeed a word of infinite use on emergencies such as these. She was "the best creature possible, this cousin of theirs—there could not be a better; but so odd and unlike other people—so little a woman of the world! In fact cousin Sally, as they called her, was quite a character, and gloried in nothing so much as showing her contempt for conventualities. So that I must confess to you, Mr. Cranston, that whenever our worthy relative is favouring us with a visit, we are rather shy of inviting strangers to the house—we really are. You'll say it is very naughty of us, but we cannot help seeing how little her old-world peculiarities assimilate with the tone of general society."

To all this Mr. Cranston courteously made answer, that in truth he could not regard himself as in any respect a stranger at that house—Mr. Frere's letters having introduced to him most of its inmates long since. "And it could hardly be presumed," he added, with a smile of some drollery, "that a lady so very eccentric as

Mrs. Sarah Barclay should be passed over without a particular description."

Kezia looked quite affectionately at the young rector, whose easiness and pliancy in the character of dupe endeared him to her in a high degree. "She feared," she said, "that not Mrs. Sarah only, but each member of their simple-minded home circle had sustained hard treatment in those long, clever letters of Mr. Manley's;" whereupon the deluded Cranston was going to make some rash and unguarded reply—something, perhaps, which he would have repented the next moment—when, luckily, the approach of cousin Sally cut short their colloquy.

Divet had succeeded in extricating Frere from her grasp, before any dangerous disclosures had been conveyed to the blunted hearing of that unfortunate gentleman. But, while deferring generally to the views and opinions of the confederates, and not unwilling to hold her tongue as soon as the propriety of such a measure was explained to her, the eccentric one still showed herself discontented with what had been done during her temporary absence, and, as she neared the drawing-room door, she was loudly expressing her sentiments.

"Ah! it's all very well, Master David; but I'd have seen that girl at Jericho before she should have darkened my doors—an ill-contrived hussy like that, that you've all been abusing at no allowance! What do you say? You couldn't help it?" repeating Divet's mumbled reply, and turning fiercely round upon him—

"Impossible? nothing impossible in it! Hospitality, indeed! a fig for you and your hospitality; I know how much that's worth, Master Davy. At the point of death, do you say? Well, suppose she had been. I'll tell you what, David Divet, if it had been me and my house, she should have dropped on the door-step, or died in a ditch, as her betters have done before her, for any thing that I would have cared about the matter."

"Do be quiet, you old virago!" whispered David; "there's the young parson within hearing." But neither his remonstrances, nor the actual sight of the stranger, made much impression on the downright Sally. "I only wish I had been here!" she proceeded, entering the drawing-room with her garments tucked up to the ankles, an indescribable cloak upon her shoulders, and perched upon her head, over what she termed her "dress cap," a thing of whalebone and silk, inherited from her grandmother, and called a "calash." For the independent old lady, utterly repudiating every species of carriage, had walked home through the rain with only a boy and a lantern. "I only wish I had been amongst you all! I'd have sent Madam Barbara packing with a witness; as if there were no more men in the world to make fools of, but she must come prowling about after her old sweetheart. But it's ten to one you have cut your own throats by it—that's one comfort!"

"A-a-hem!" ejaculated David, getting purple in his efforts to stop her.

"Allow me to undo your cloak, cousin," said Kezia, busying herself in unrigging the old Marplot, and inflict-

ing, as she did so, a sharp pinch by way of reminder. "We all know the kind interest you take in our dear Mr. Manley; but I assure you that, though we may have made one false step, we intend for the future to be as discreet as you yourself can desire. Here is Mr. Cranston actually giving us lessons in the difficult science of dissimulation."

'Difficult!" echoed cousin Sally with a sniff of derision. "Lord forgive you, Kezia Barclay! Well, if ever I heard any thing better than that! No, no; don't meddle with my calash, or my cap and my wig will come off with it, and a pretty figure of fun I shall be then."

Another well-directed pinch from Mrs. George, recalled the old lady to some sense of the improprieties she was indulging in, and she condescended to listen, quietly enough, to a short summary of their "views" ("Mr. Cranston's views," in fact) for preserving dear, good Mr. Manley from falling into the snares of that sad girl, who had evidently sought him out for no earthly purpose but to teaze and worry him with her heartless coquetries, "poor, dear man!"

"Well, well, we shall see how it will all turn out," was cousin Sally's remark; "but if you think of keeping that poor soul and Miss What's-her-name asunder, you must look sharp after the servants, let me tell you that, Mrs. Kezia. Your precious Elizabeth, as you call her, with her flounced aprons and ruffle-cuffs, and all the rest of her fal-lals and rigmaroles, you must keep a tight hand over her, or the game's all up with you; and there's that gossiping old goose, Mother Spicer, what's

to hinder her from being a go-between, I should like to know? But I suppose you think yourselves able to manage your own matters without cousin Sally's interference; so good-night to you all—good-night, Davy—good-night, Mr. Cranston—take care of Mr. Manley, if you can; he'll be sure to be snapped up by some fortune-hunting girl or other;"—here was another significant sniff, and a sweeping glance at the whole party. "But any of them's more fit to make him a tidy, comfortable wife than this Miss Thingamy."

Cranston laughed heartily as the old lady shut the door after her; and his companions, while wincing to their finger-ends, thought it the best policy to join him in his mirth; but they had hardly resumed their seats, congratulating themselves, as they did so, that they were rid of cousin Sally for the night, when the door burst open with a characteristic jerk, and the calash once more appeared in the aperture. "I'll tell you what I would do, if I were you," said she; "you can't very well turn this minx out of doors if she chooses to stay, so the best way of spoiling her game will be to get quit of her deary. Just let him shift his quarters, and you may snap your fingers at the whole gang of the Girdlestones as soon as you like it."

Thrown quite off her guard by such a proposal, Phebe called out, "Good gracious, cousin Sally, why, if we let him go now, he may never come back again!" she bit her lips when the words had escaped them, fearing to have committed herself with the young rector; but there was little cause for alarm. The master mind,

which was so ready to assume the direction of a friend under difficulties, heard nothing in Miss Divet's involuntary exclamation but a fresh proof of the "deep sensibility," and "child-like innocence," which it was pleased to impute to her.

The coarseness of the remark, and the low cunning it really implied, escaped Cranston entirely. What could be more natural than the reluctance of this charming little person to lose sight of the object of her secret veneration? What more touching than the fear thus artlessly revealed, that the separation might prove eternal? Indeed Mr. Cranston was so worked upon by Phebe's unsophisticated manners, that he was tempted to go further, by way of consoling the young lady, than was quite justifiable; for he answered her promptly, that on *that* head she need entertain no sort of apprehension. "There are," he said, softening his tone and speaking with dangerous significance, "there are attractions at *this* house which must make it only too difficult for Frere to tear himself away from it, or to remain long absent when he has the privilege of returning; here he checked himself, remembering he had no warrant for thus compromising another, and added, by way of diluting the strength of the compliment and giving it a more popular meaning, "Knowing my friend so well, it appears to me that my only difficulty in adopting this good lady's project, will consist in detaching him from society amongst whom he has received such uniform kindness and attention, and towards every member of which he entertains such sincere esteem."

Cautiously as he had worded the latter half of his speech, there were certain of Mr. Cranston's audience, and two fair members of it in particular, who could scarcely fail to appropriate the former and more flattering portion of it entirely to themselves.

And yet the project of transporting the deaf guest from the hospitalities of the Etheridge mansion, stood in such manifest opposition to the whole effort and aim of the Divets' exertions—all they had yet done, and intended still to do—that there was not one of them who did not shudder for the consequences of cousin Sally's most rash and—as some suspected—malicious interference. In their hearts they would have preferred running every risk connected with the Girdlestones, rather than have seen the deaf guest spirited away from them; yet having, for their private purposes, magnified the perils which threatened him under their roof, they could not, with any regard to consistency, raise objections against a measure which would so easily obviate the difficulties they themselves had raised and exaggerated.

They laboured hard, therefore, to preserve their equanimity while Mr. Cranston examined into the propriety and feasibility of such a step; explaining to them, with the most provoking complacency, how convenient it would be to himself personally, if he could persuade his friend to accompany him to town on the morrow, he having business in London which would shortly require his presence there. "And yet," he added presently, "he hardly knew what to say to the scheme—he was not sure that it would altogether answer;"

and, stealing a glance at the pet lamb, the young rector suffered himself to wander into the mazes of a rather intricate calculation. For although, in the enthusiasm of the moment, he was capable of being beguiled into rash innuendo or soft speechifying, he harboured, in fact, no small portion of the general distrust, and had strong doubts whether Manley Frere was really so deeply touched by the merits of Miss Divet as to allow of his partiality bearing the test of absence.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WIND CHANGES.

WHILE doubt and despondency crept over the conspirators, neutralizing considerably the effect of Mr. Cranston's soothing compliments, there was still one of the party who heard and applied them to herself with scarcely a single misgiving. "Fear not but he will return. There are attractions in *this* house which will make it difficult for my friend to remain long away from it!"

Miss Palliser could understand the motives of delicacy which hindered Cranston from directing these words, in all their pointed significance, full at her. His eyes had but slightly designated her in the look with which he seemed to include the whole assembled family; but could there be the remotest question as to the individual he specially intended? And would this thoughtful and judicious man (for universally he bore that character) have spoken with such decision, unless the fullest licence had been given him so to speak? A formal declaration from Frere himself could scarcely have carried stronger conviction of his feelings and inten-

tions than this unequivocal language, addressed to her by the friend who knew him almost as he knew himself.

The flattering assurance which Cranston had ventured to express, while it enlivened the Divets for only a brief season, brought life and health to the Colonel's mistress. "Fear not that he will tarry long from all that charms and interests him"—thus did she piece out the meagre sentence, diversifying its terms, and delightedly illustrating what she—fond woman!—imagined to be the meaning of the speaker—"Fear nothing that the morrow can bring you, even though it bears him from your sight. He quits you with reluctance equal to your own, and only departs that he may remove the obstacles which stand between you and him. When this end is attained, and your happiness accomplished, fear not but he will hasten back—never more to leave you."

It was at the bedside of poor Barbara that these aspirations mounted to their loftiest pitch; and objects, hitherto wavering in the uncertain atmosphere of hope, assumed a steadier and more definite shape. In Miss Girdlestone's forlorn condition, and in the striking manner through which her intrusion into that house was made to forward the ultimate felicity of another, Maria Palliser continued to trace (as she supposed) the course of a destiny solely and entirely propitious to herself.

The confederates, resolving not to leave their patient alone with the servants, had gratefully closed with Maria's proposal, that she should divide with them the

watches of the night. "I am a practised nurse," she said, "and you may safely trust her to me."

The words were simple enough, yet Kezia chose to impute to them a hidden meaning, and replied significantly that she was "quite sure of that." Wild and skittish as Miss Girdlestone might be—poor young thing!—she would be safe enough under the superintendence of their prudent Maria. "And if you are really not inclined to sleep yourself, my dear Miss Palliser, I confess I shall be very glad to close this day of fatigue and excitement with a few hours' rest. Call me to supply your place whenever you like, or in case any thing should happen to make my assistance desirable—not that, in spite of Mr. Jones's long face, *I* anticipate any alarming change: the old man is notorious for his croaking propensities; and in this case, I take it, your experience will be fully adequate to the occasion. In all respects, morally as well as physically, you will be able to *manage* our pretty patient, I make no doubt," and giving forth a gentle laugh, after the manner of her grandfather, Mrs. George bade her cousin elect "Good-night."

A little while ago, and Maria would have recoiled from a style of language which enrolled her at once as an active member in the family conspiracy, but now, in recalling the significant words of Richard Cranston, she lost the very meaning of Kezia's; nor, as with pride and exultation swelling her heart, and dancing in every vein, she looked down upon the helpless being whom they were all leaguing together to betray, did she once re-

flect how nearly such feelings were assimilating her to the person whom, of all others, she most hated and despised?

In painful opposition to the bright and confident expression of her attendant, lay the suffering girl, over whom she was secretly exulting,—her looks of eager hope, and the air of gentle command, which had sat so prettily upon her, all gone by, and giving place to the languor of sickness, and the dejection inseparable from protracted suspense.

Her father had been with her at the close of the day, trying to impress her with his own timid scruples; and though Miss Girdlestone could not be won over to renounce the purpose for which she had undertaken this disastrous journey, or to place much credit on the unfavourable change which was reported to have overshadowed the disposition of her old lover, the interview had left her with a pulse so quickened, and such feverish indications, that the doctor, visiting her shortly afterwards, had remarked with some anxiety on the alteration his patient exhibited, had amended his prescription, and strictly enjoined care and quiet to be observed in her treatment.

And now it was, in the bad spirit we have described, that Maria Palliser, having drawn aside the curtain at her head, was gazing on poor Barbara, who happened at the moment to be lying with her eyes closed; when, lo! the voice of cousin Sally sounded just in Maria's ear, and, turning with a start, she found that that truculent old lady had stumped in unawares, and was en-

gaged in the same amusement as herself,—examining, that is to say, the features of the fair young creature who was exciting such a lively interest in every member of the Divets' household.

It would seem, however, from what ensued, that Mrs. Sarah's estimation of Miss Girdlestone's charms by no means tallied with the general opinion; for, without taking much trouble to subdue her voice to the required whisper, she put on a most depreciating countenance, and, jerking her head contemptuously at every other word, pronounced the young lady to be "No great shakes, for all the fuss that was made about her! That's my ipsey dixsey, Miss P. No great shakes, after all! I've seen better, and I've seen worse; and so I shall make bold to tell her old sweetheart some of these days, for I don't see any good in mincing the matter."

It was evident that some part of this candid criticism had caught the attention of Miss Girdlestone; for she suddenly raised her eyelids with such a stare of surprise, that Maria dropped the curtain between them, whispering cousin Sally to be quiet,—"For Heaven's sake, hush, ma'm! She is not asleep."

"No matter for that, Miss Maria," t he other replied "people must hear the truth sometimes, be they gentle or simple. And if it is the first time Miss What's-her-name has ever heard it, why, so much the worse for her."

She did not, however, continue her animadversions on Frere's false love, but adopted another mode of annoyance.

Drawing near the foot of the bed, where Maria, in the

absence of Mrs. Spicer, was preparing to apply fresh fomentations to the sprained ankle, cousin Sally went on speaking in such a strenuous whisper, that Miss Girdlestone could distinguish every word she uttered.

"That's an ugly job, Miss P. I wouldn't have that leg belong to me for something handsome."

"The sprain will soon b reduced, ma'm," Maria coldly answered,—"so at least the doctor says."

"What, the chap at old Jones's? Why, you don't suppose he'd speak his real mind to her? Lord, Miss Maria, what a simpleton you must be to fancy it! No, no! He's a poor little titivating fellow, but he's not quite such a blockhead as that neither. Don't you know, Miss P., that the more danger there is in a case of this kind, the more lies those doctoring chaps are sure to tell about it?—palavering to the poor patients, and pretending they are getting well, while they know all the time that there is not a chance of saving them. Many a leg has looked as well as that, and better too, at night, that has mortified before the morning. So don't let that jigameree of an apprentice persuade you to the contrary."

It was evident from the attitude she assumed that Miss Girdlestone was listening attentively; but Maria, better acquainted with the person who was holding forth, simply requested cousin Sally not to be ridiculous, and went on with her occupation.

"If you had only heard what old Jones was saying the last time he called," the old lady continued, "you wouldn't take matters quite so easy, Miss P. You see,

my dear, he was talking to a friend of mine, who happens to be a little bit hard of hearing—which is a misfortune that may overtake *all* of us, Miss Maria, and probably will. But, as I am telling you, this friend of mine is rather deaf than otherwise, and so old Jones was obliged to speak loud to him, and that was how I came to overhear what they were both saying."

Here Mrs. Sarah cleared her voice in a style that would have roused a much more drowsy audience, and fixed an unflinching regard upon the shadowy form that was now sitting upright in bed, lest it should lose a word of the narrative.

"'I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Frere,' says old Jones; 'between you and me, Mr. Manley,' says he—'though I wouldn't have you mention it again—I haven't had a worse case this many a day. And if that poor young lady gets off with only the loss of a leg—with nothing worse than the loss of her precious limb,' old Jones says—'she may think herself a lucky woman.'"

Again Maria was beginning to remonstrate,—"For heaven's sake, Mrs. Sarah!" when there came a soft, sweet voice from the bed, asking earnestly, "And what did Mr. Frere say then?"

"Why, he didn't trouble himself to make much of an answer," replied the old lady; "for he was just going to take himself off to bed, very sleepy and tired, poor dear man! You see he is a philosopher, that friend I am speaking of—quite a philosopher; and what he said to the apothecary was this,—'There are some folks in the world, Jones,' says he, 'that never meet with their

deserts, and there are other folks that do,'—and then he lit his candle and wished old Jones good-night: for he is one of them that never forgets his manners. Yes, Miss G., those were his very words. 'Mr. Jones,' says he——"

By this time Barbara was leaning on her elbow, and gazing on the loquacious apparition with eyes of credulous wonder. "Did Mr. Frere say this?" she asked timidly. But when Mrs. Sarah was preparing to asseverate to the truth of her statement with something, we fear, not far removed from the nature of an oath, Maria thought proper to interpose, and, going up to her patient, explained briefly that this singular visiter was a sort of privileged jester at the manor-house, to whose discourse no sort of credit need be given.

"But who is she? Another nurse?" asked Barbara.

"No, a relation of the family; very queer and eccentric, but quite in her senses: Miss Girdlestone need not be afraid of her."

"How very singular!" was the young lady's remark, as she gradually fell back again upon her pillow; yet still with her wondering eyes intent upon cousin Sally. She soothed her injured dignity by calling to mind that even kings and kaisers, in "the brave times of old," were used to submit with a good grace to the gibes and sarcasms of the professional fool.

Still the position of affairs struck Maria as so equivocal, that, though desirous of quitting the sick-room in order to make her own preparations for the night-watch, she hesitated at leaving her patient, for even that brief

interval, at the mercy of so ruthless a substitute; and she did not depart without cautioning the irascible old lady to be moderate in her conduct, and observe the orders of the medical men—both doctors, she said, having enjoined the propriety of keeping Miss Girdlestone free from all excitement.

"They be hanged, for a couple of humbugs!" was the answer. "I wont be dictated to by the old quack, or his merry-andrew, either. So off with you, Miss P., and don't keep me dawdling here much longer; for I don't like my company, I can tell you that!"

But, spite of these unpromising indications, when Maria, having completed her toilet, hurried back to keep the peace, she was struck with the change which had already taken place in the aspect of the chamber. It was no longer cousin Sally who was scolding in unmeasured terms, or grumbling in audible soliloquy—Barbara herself was now the speaker, while Mrs. Sarah stood passively listening; and, though her arms were set akimbo, yet Maria knew that was a favourite attitude with cousin Sally, adopted in all moods of the mind, and therefore judged that there was no call for immediate interference. In the meanwhile she approached the bed, wondering at the strange conjunction that seemed to be already effected between this most incongruous pair.

It would appear that, even in Miss Girdlestone's own eyes, her conduct demanded some apology—some sort of explanation, at least. "It was," she said, "so great an indulgence to her to converse about Mr. Frere, especially with those who loved and respected him;" for his name

was all but prohibited at her own home. "Not that mamma or my brothers think less highly of him than they used, but they feel that he has been slighted—cruelly slighted by us; and that, I am sure it is, makes them shun every reference to him, and treat it as a subject quite forbidden. And though my dear father, who is all tenderness for us both, lets me say whatever I like to him, yet he is not of a very cheerful or sanguine disposition; and, when I speak to him of Manley Frere, he answers me so sadly, and such a shadow falls upon his face, that I have not the courage to go on. But I often think how little they know of me, if they can fancy that silence will weaken my remembrance or soften my regret."

"But Lord help us, Miss Girdlestone!" exclaimed cousin Sally, "if you keep up such a hankering after your old sweetheart, in the name of goodness how did it come about that you ever used him so ill, poor, dear soul?"

"Indeed, indeed, I cannot tell you, mam! When I look back upon my conduct during that most miserable period, it seems to me the greatest mystery in the world; and you cannot condemn me more than I hate and despise myself. Oh, I have been so wretched ever since! And still I fancy that, if they had given me time for consideration, I should have acted very differently; but the shock of that dreadful news came upon me quite suddenly, and as something so terrible—so destructive of all our hopes of happiness—that I was utterly overwhelmed, and became passive in the hands of others."

"Ah! your aunt, Mrs. Thingumee, had a finger in that pie," suggested Sally.

"You allude, probably, to Mrs. Babington?" Miss Girdlestone replied, in a sort of tone which was intended to repress the vulgar assurance of her new acquaintance, —in fact, she was obliged to remember the allegorical cap and bells with which Maria had invested cousin Sally, before she could digest this unceremonious mention of her mother's sister. "I suppose you allude to Mrs. Babington of Hollingsworth?"

"To be sure I do!" said cousin Sally, nothing daunted by the stiffness of the young lady. "Who else should I mean? Folks always said that she had an eye upon some broken-down puppy of a lord that she wanted for you, and so she persuaded you to jilt poor Mr. Manley on his account."

With a blush of mortification Miss Girdlestone asked, was it possible such a report could ever have been current? and received for answer, that Mrs. Sarah had heard it "scores of times. I can't say you were spoken over well of yourself, Miss. G.; but most of us laid the best share of the mischief at your aunt's door."

"Ah, ma'm!" said Barbara ingeniously, "but if I had acted only on my own suggestion, I should have been still more inexcusable. And, after all," sighing bitterly, "it makes my character only the weaker, that in such a point, and at such a time as that, I should have suffered any one on earth to lead me."

"Well, it was queer enough—you are right there!" the old lady replied with her accustomed candour; though that

was beginning to be tempered with rather more civility than she had before displayed; "it was a funny way of shewing your respect for your spark, to send him about his business just because he grew a little hard of hearing—poor young fellow! It made a great cabobbery at the time, I remember: some said one thing, and some another; but I believe it was generally thought that there was a lord at the bottom of it."

"Oh, no—no!" Barbara exclaimed, as if shocked at the insinuation. "Do not believe it of me! Whatever were the views that some of my family might entertain, never did an idea of the sort cross *my* mind. No, I have been weak—miserably, culpably weak—but never treacherous!"

Prejudice itself could hardly have listened unmoved to the warm and ingenuous language in which Miss Girdlestone poured forth her feelings; and, despite the wonder, not quite free from a tincture of contempt, with which Maria found her entering upon her story, it awakened a greater portion of her sympathy than a few hours ago she would have conceived possible. She believed that no earthly inducement could have tempted *her* to lay bare the working of her woman's heart to such an auditor as cousin Sally; yet she was glad to profit by the old lady's familiar questioning and coarse comments, to become more intimately acquainted with the facts which had rendered Miss Girdlestone's name so identical with that of the celebrated Barbara Allan. "It must be a most inferior character that can so easily unveil itself," she argued—"a mind most unworthy of his." Yet,

insensibly as the narrative proceeded, her reluctant sympathies were more powerfully awakened, till she caught herself actually exchanging glances of pity and indulgence with honest old Sally Barclay.

And it would have been hard indeed to have shown severity towards one who judged herself with such rigid impartiality. Notwithstanding the bad influence of her family, and especially that of her aunt, was plainly to be traced in every step leading to the rupture with Frere, Miss Girdlestone's censure was all self-directed.

"They thought I was not fit to be his wife," she said; "that my temper would fail me, and that I should not have patience to bear with such an infirmity as his. And they told me I was the last person in the world capable of making his home happy, and bringing him the comfort he deserved to have. But I ought not to have believed them. It was an impious distrust of the Heaven that had made us so dear to each other. If I had examined my own heart, as I ought to have done, I should have known its strength, and have rejected their miserable advice. I saw plainly, when all was over, that I had been as false to myself and my own nature as I had been to him. But it was too late then: and, oh, how bitterly I have mourned my folly from that day unto this! The mere separation was hard enough to bear; but when I thought how lowered I must be in his opinion—how he must be disdaining such a poor fickle creature as I had proved myself—I often wondered how I could have lived throughout this miserable year!"

"Why didn't you tip him a letter, Miss G.?" said cousin Sally.

"I did write to him, ma'm; but, as I never received the slightest answer, I began to suspect that my friends, in their mistaken care, might have intercepted my letters. But now, since you have mentioned this horrid report, another reason has occurred to me; for if he, like the rest of the world, gave any credit to it, who can wonder at his refusing to answer me? Do you think it likely that the report about Lord —— could have reached Mr. Frere?"

"I'd lay a good wager it has," said the old lady. "For though Mr. Manley is pretty deaf, he is not dunny."

Miss Girdlestone pressed her hand upon her eyes with a sob of shame and anguish; but then, as if taking courage, she roused herself, and said more firmly, "Well, if Heaven gives me strength for the interview, I shall at least be able, before I leave this house, to clear myself from that foul calumny. And, since you have told me what has been said, I shall be more grateful than ever for the accident which, by lodging me under the same roof with him, ensures our meeting."

Rueful, and somewhat conscience-striken, was the look which passed between her two attendants, as poor Barbara, with an innocent air of security, thus expressed herself. She trembled still when she contemplated the future; but only for the result of her meeting again with the man who had loved her so tenderly, and whom she had so weakly deserted. Never did a suspicion cross

her mind of the malice and manœuvring that was at work to prevent the slightest intercourse between them.

Mrs. Sarah, especially, would fain have afforded some comfort to the beautiful mourner; but, conversant as she was with the secrets of the house, how was that to be done? Beginning with a sort of compunctious groan, and a wink at Miss Palliser, she adopted an obscurity of style that might be reckoned more safe than intelligible.

"Yes, as you say, Miss Girdleston, it's all a toss-up with us in this world. You thought to sleep twenty miles on the other side of Etheredge, and here you are laid up in lavender, and not knowing what may come of it; for we are here to-day and gone to-morrow. What will be, will be, you know, and it does no good to fret about it. But never mind, my dear." (The old lady was melting faster and faster, and growing more affectionate in her style.) "Never you fidget and fuss yourself, Miss G. Who knows but matters may take turn and turn about, and come right after all, some of these days? Many a queer thing has come to pass that some folks never dreamt about—isn't it so, Miss Maria? So, now, all you have to do is to go to sleep like a good girl, and try to get well as fast as you can; and I'll say my service to you—for here comes Dame Spicer with a fresh cargo of physic," and cousin Sally made a contemptuous face at it. "What have you got there, Mother Goose?"

"More stuff from the doctor's, Mrs. Sally; and beautiful it is to look at: it's as clear as crystil, and to be taken every three hours."

"It's all my eye, mammy Spicer! and, if she was a child of mine, I'd give her a good dose of camomile tea instead of that trumpery; and, I'll be bound to say, she'd be all right by to-morrow morning. But Gaffer Jones and his hobble-de-hoy know a trick worth two of that! I say, Miss Maria, I want to have a little chat with you."

Maria turned a deaf ear to the request, for she desired no confidences in that quarter; but cousin Sally repeated her summons in a louder tone, and there was no escaping a brief conference in the lobby.

"Just you come here," said the old lady, "and shut the door behind you, or mother Spicer will be up to us and our secrets before we can say Jack Robinson. You see I rather want to know a bit of your mind, Miss P. Between you and me now, what do you think about this rigmarole?"

"About what, Mrs. Sarah?"

"Why, about these lackadaisicals we have just been listening to. I saw you had some trouble to keep the tears out of your eyes while the poor thing was telling us all her griefs. Of course, she ought to have stuck faster to her first love, nobody denies that; but she says herself what a wicked little jilt she has been, and, as she makes out her story, there might have been some excuse for her. Lord help her, poor soul! she was no match for that aunt of hers. I know a thing or two about Madam Babington, for all she carries her head so high, and not much to her credit neither, and if she meddled, as it seems she did, in her niece's affairs, it is not to be wondered that they turned out so badly. I'm

not sure but I should take as much pleasure in circumnavigating that old witch, Mother Babington, as in doing a good turn for Miss What's-her-name. And now, what do you say to the matter—eh, my dear? What do you think about bringing the young couple together, and making them snug and comfortable again? Nothing, you know, could be easier, if we only set ourselves in good earnest, you and me, to bring it about—eh, Miss P.? Come, don't stand shilly-shally there, but give me your ipsey-dixsey, and have done with it!"

It seemed as if the air from the broad staircase, towards which they were slowly pacing, had caught Miss Palliser's breath; for it was a moment or two before she could reply, and then, stopping and staring Mrs. Sarah in the face, she repeated her words in manifest consternation—"Bring them together again! Good heavens! ma'm, what are you thinking of?"

At the highest point of her compassion for their interesting patient, such a project had never crossed Maria's mind as within the limits of possibility; and the almost certain destruction which it foreboded to her own fond hopes covered her with a confusion she could not conceal.

"Oh, I know well enough what a sisserara there'd be about it. The Divets would all be as mad as Old Scratch; and no wonder, after all their twisting and turning. But, Lord! Miss P., what would it signify to you or me either, if we knew we were doing a good-natured turn? For as for little Phebe, between ourselves, my dear, that young man cares no more for her than he does for this old shoe of mine. I always have said it,

and always shall. She's an amusement and a plaything to him; and, if they ever should compass their ends, why, she may make him a decentish kind of wife enough. But don't you think, after all, he'd be better off with his old sweetheart? With all her faults—and you see she's sorry enough for them now—don't you think she's more suitable for Mr. Manley?—more like himself, and, as one may say, what he has been used to all his days till he came amongst us. You see, Miss Maria, the Divets are all very well in their own way, and they are my relations, and so I come to see them every year, and I mean to leave them a little of my bank stock by way of remembrance; but further than that, why, we are pretty much of a muchness. If they are up to old cousin Sally and her queer ways, why, she's not to be bamboozled by them. So I should make no bones of circumventing the whole pack of them, if I saw the reason why? But you are not of my way of thinking?" the old lady added, evidently disappointed by the reluctance of her companion. Maria murmured something not very intelligible about the very important consequences which such a step involved, and the expediency of giving it further consideration—"Surely, they ought to do nothing precipitate in a case of such infinite delicacy."

"A fig for your delicacy!" was the answer. "I see where the shoe pinches. You think the Colonel would snub you if he found out that you had been thwarting his relations. And, to be sure, Ben *is* very fond of them all; and he mightn't be best pleased with you for meddling and making in their concerns. But for all

that, Ben Hussey is an honest fellow in the main, and if we were to let him know the rights of the case—eh? But you don't relish my plans, that's plain enough to be seen; and so I may cut short my palaver, and go to my nightcap. Ah! well, I thought you'd some pity for the poor girl that's lying there with so many false friends about her! But since you are so mightily afraid of the Divets, why, there's an end of the matter—at least so far as concerns you. As for me, I thank my stars I've no sweetheart to call *me* over the coals for doing a good turn to a neighbour; so I may follow my own vagaries, and cut what capers I please. And now I have said my say, and so good-night to you, Mrs. Colonel Hussey, that is to be—and well the name will suit you, for a more stiff-backed, cold-hearted *hussy* I've seldom come across,"—thus grumbled the old lady to herself as she trudged along the passage to her own sleeping chamber.

"What Master Ben could see in such a stuck-up thing to make a numbskull of him, I never could find out. She can't do *this* thing because it isn't correct; and she won't do the *other* because it's out of the perpendicular. What the deuce was the good of her snivelling over that poor child, if she refuses to stretch out a hand to help her! But if Sally Barclay can prevent it, they sha'n't have every thing their own way in this house—hang me if they shall! I'll put them all to the rout still—clever as they think themselves; and I'll shame this starched-up thing that I've been wasting my breath upon, and bother old Mother Babington into the bargain!"

CHAPTER XII.

A SISTER OF CHARITY.

THE reciter of this soliloquy had more than one long passage to perambulate before she got housed for the night; yet cousin Sally had reached her dormitory, and added many a period to her declamation, while Maria Palliser remained still upon the spot where she had left her. It is indeed, figuratively as well as literally, hard to move when we feel as though the ground were slipping from under our very feet; and the firmer and surer we have believed ourselves beforehand, and the more certain of our purposes and plans, the more does the foot falter and the brain reel when first we are awakened to the actual uncertainty of our condition.

This young creature, whom, in the plenitude of her self-security, Maria had just been regarding with such hollow pity, as a mourner utterly without hope, had found a friend, and a powerful one too—no lukewarm condoler, content to sentimentalize by her bedside; but a sturdy champion, who would probably leave no effort unattempted to turn the current of events to her advantage. And it was only on one supposition that Maria could defy the officious interference of cousin

Sally. Had she indeed been satisfied of her power over Frere, she might have stood aloof in dignified inactivity, and seen him readmitted to the society of his first love, secure that no result unfavourable to her interests would ensue from their meeting. But it was an idle wish, not for an instant to be seriously entertained. So far from relying on any such controlling influence of her own, she was persuaded that her most passionate love, and most unchangeable fidelity, would weigh but as dust against the base metal glittering in the opposite scale—the varied and seducing graces of the frail being who, even by her own confession, had treated him so cruelly.

When his eyes rested again upon that angelic face, would he remember how relentlessly it had been turned away from him, when most he had needed the consolation of its beauty and sweetness? Or if these things recurred to him, would he be able to retain any trace of his old displeasure? No! The firmness which could resist such temptations as he would have to sustain, was not to be found among the sons of men; and Maria herself, conscious of the hold Miss Girdlestone had taken upon her sympathy, thought she should scarcely blame him if he fell once more beneath the same captivating spell which had first enthralled him. Now she repented having offered to keep watch over the invalid. In absence she might have retained many of her old prejudices; and, if deprived of the luxury of quite hating the beautiful Barbara, she might still have continued to regard her as a fickle girl, too light and unreflecting to be a meet companion for the incomparable being whom she

had voluntarily renounced. From the dissipation of this error resulted many a compunctious pang and many a misgiving, which, in the midst of what was purely selfish, bore evidence of the finer qualities which made part of Maria Palliser's imperfect character. As long as her fears of cousin Sally's counterplotting predominated, it was impossible not to observe Miss Girdlestone with the eye of suspicion; but when the whole bearings of the case were considered, the probability on the other hand that Frere, under the sage guidance of his friend, would soon be removed from danger, and in the meanwhile would still have the Divets' skill and consummate address to protect him—all which serviceable qualities would be strained to the utmost the moment they obtained a hint of Mrs. Sarah's defalcation; then, seeing how little hope poor Barbara could justly entertain, Maria was assailed by such touches of pity and remorse as caused her vigil to pass wearily.

She had read of natures so noble, and so all-sufficient in their power of self-government, that, for the sake of others, they had uprooted the strongest desire of their heart, and sacrificed all they held most dear and delightful. She wondered now that such tales could ever have been written, or that they could have found favour with even the young and romantic. Yet even while she drove the thought from her as something monstrous and unnatural, the intensity with which she longed for some opportunity—some occasion short of this impassible sacrifice—for evincing charity and good-will towards poor Barbara, showed how it haunted her. There was no service so

irksome, no trial so severe, that she would not have sustained for one she commiserated so sincerely, and whose greatest disappointment was yet (as Maria supposed) to emanate from herself. The fearfullest infliction of pain and suffering, the most deadly infection, should not scare her from her patient's pillow; nay, if called upon for that last sacrifice, she would lay down life itself for her sake—but to give *him* up to her! No, never—never!

In these absorbing reflections the hours passed more swiftly than might have been expected, and daybreak found Maria still assiduous, still untired. And when a movement in the house, the creaking of a distant stair, gave her to suppose that Mrs. George or her sister were coming, as they had promised, to relieve her, she regretted they were so punctual; and looking round the scene of her monotonous duties—the curtained chamber with its watch-light struggling with the grey dawn of morning, the patient at last lulled to sleep, and old Spicer slumbering in her easy-chair—she thought of the troubles which the coming day must surely bring upon her, and was sorry that the night was over. Even should the lesser evil prevail, and her own star still shine triumphant, there was enough in her sympathy for others, her own ill-used lover, and the fair mourner, lying there so unconscious of the blow she was preparing for her, to embitter her secret joy, and scatter ashes of humiliation on her pride of heart.

Maria had approached the bed to take a mute farewell of her patient, when Miss Girdlestone, starting

suddenly from sleep with a frightened cry, and clasping her arms round her, exclaimed—"Oh, I have such horrid dreams whenever I close my eyes! Stay with me for a little while; it is such a comfort to feel that I have something kind and good beside me, instead of those terrible phantoms! And that one most of all; for *he* is always amongst them, sometimes upbraiding me, at others cold and sad—as if he were suffering as well as myself. But it is not so," she added with an appealing look at Maria, as if she would fain be contradicted. "They tell me he has quite regained his spirits, and is *so* cheerful and contented! Do you think him so? Does it strike you in the same light?"

"Not being originally acquainted with Mr. Frere, it is impossible for me to say whether he is changed or not," Maria evasively answered; and was going to add a little advice as to the propriety of Barbara's restraining her feelings, and striving to be prepared for any change that might have taken place in those of her former lover; but the words of exhortation shortly grew confused and obscure, and Miss Girdlestone might have felt the pulse of her quiet nurse beating faster than her own. The chamber-door had been left open for the sake of ventilation; and, amidst the stillness which reigned over every thing, Maria could plainly distinguish the footsteps drawing near. Not those she was expecting to hear; not the smart, assured tread of either of the Divet women, but the calm, deliberate footfall of one meditating in solitude—a step never by her to be mistaken, for it was the only indication of

man's approach that had ever yet brought joy and gladness to her heart. Now she heard it with a guilty shudder. It was, in fact, no ominous turn of fortune that was bringing Manley Frere into their vicinity: he loved to see the sun rise, and the window in the adjoining passage having an easterly aspect, he might, on other fine mornings besides this, have been observed sauntering in that part of the house. The Colonel's betrothed, however, startled from her calm reflections by an incident so utterly unlooked for, could fancy nothing but that it must bear some reference to Miss Girdlestone. The bed stood in such a position that no one merely passing the door could be observed from it; yet Maria, so certain herself whose foot it was that was almost upon the threshold, felt as if Barbara must of necessity recognise it also, and, in her confusion, could only answer her patient's confiding pressure by drawing her closer and closer to her bosom. A moment or two of wild alarm ensued, and then the weight was lifted from her fainting spirits. He had passed the door, neither pausing nor swerving from his onward path, and the "Sister of Mercy" could breathe freely once more.

Be it recorded, nevertheless, to the credit of Maria Palliser, that she had not the face to proceed with her calm counsels and tone of superiority. Her forehead was not of brass, nor her heart wholly formed of adamant; and as she strained her unconscious victim in her apparently affectionate embrace, she groaned under a sense of cruel hypocrisy. As for Barbara, this somewhat stately attendant on her sick couch had hitherto been so much

the least demonstrative of any of the household, that, doubly impressed with the apparent warmth of her silent caresses, she said in a tone which showed how much they affected her—"How sweetly you bear the trouble I am giving you; but it will soon be over—a few hours will relieve you of my presence!" Maria could not answer her; for, painful as was the interest she took in Frere's false love, she could not bear to think that she should never see that beautiful face again, or that, if by any strange chance it crossed her path, it must necessarily wear so altered an expression. "They tell me," continued Barbara, "that you are yourself engaged, and soon to be married; in another fortnight, I think nurse told me. It must be your prosperous love that makes you so indulgent to my egotisim and folly;" then, pressing Maria's hand to her lips, she said with much feeling—"May you be as happy as you deserve; I cannot wish more for you, than that your career in life may bear as strong a contrast to mine as possible!"

Miss Girdlestone, being of an open and affectionate disposition, experienced no surprise at the almost passionate though silent embrace which was Maria's only reply. She looked after her, as she turned from the bed evidently repressing some strong emotion, and her gratitude waxed higher still; for in the gentle egotism, of which she was herself somewhat conscious, Barbara attributed Miss Palliser's display of feeling only to the interest excited by her own melancholy and touching story; and as, with the noble and sincere, reality must always predominate over an affectation of senti-

ment, it came to pass that the patient felt her heart yearn more towards this generally calm and taciturn lady, than towards any one who had yet waited upon her.

Mrs. Barclay's entrance shortly after, relieved Maria from her painful position, and she left the sick room, resolved not to enter it again : it would be better, she thought, to incur the imputation of rudeness or inconsistency, than to put herself upon a par with the Divets, and subject herself to the secret remorse which an intimacy with this amiable and confiding girl was sure to excite : Maria formed this plan the more readily, as she reckoned that the change so likely to take place in her own prospects, would fully account to the public for such a line of conduct. In fact, whenever the real intentions of the deaf guest were made known to the world, the fierce odium (alas !) into which the object of his choice must necessarily fall in the general opinion—amongst the Husseys, Ainsworths, Girdlestones, society at large on all hands; such a clamour would be raised against the false lover, the false friend, the snake in the grass—that a little abuse, more or less, would signify little. It was of infinite consequence to Maria to understand what measures were to be adopted for the day, and whether Mr. Cranston would remain firm to his purpose of hurrying his friend away. She was accordingly vexed to find, that what she had intended only as a slight interval of repose, after the excitement and fatigue of the night, had extended half an hour, or more, beyond the usual breakfast time.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LAST RESOURCE.

DRESSING herself with the utmost despatch, Maria was passing what might be called the dangerous quarter of the mansion, without even turning her head in that direction, when a clumsy foot and a fat voice came labouring after her. It proved to be Nurse Spicer, running as fast as obesity and shortness of breath would permit,—"Miss Palliser must please come back for a moment. The poor dear young lady was in such a to-do about speaking to her before she went to her breakfast." Nurse "had been on the watch ever since the ladies went down, and Miss Girdlestone would be worrying herself quite ill if Miss Palliser did not make haste and go to her."

Maria paused irresolutely, loath so soon to break the resolution she had formed of keeping clear of further confidences. "If the ladies had been so lately with Miss Girdlestone, why, she urged, should she be wanted?"

Nurse admitted the fact, but denied the inference. "Oh yes! Missus and Miss Phebe both, and the doctor and her pa—they had all been in early attendance; and Dr. Jones thought the poor dear young lady rather

worse than better—he thought very badly of her—and nurse thought badly of her too, and so did Betty and Mrs. Sally; they all thought she was a great deal worse, except Missus and Miss Phebe, and Missus was sure she might be moved back to Langton almost directly without being at all the worse for it—Mrs. George rather thought it might do her good."

Thus, after the manner of her tribe, the old woman ran on as they approached the invalid's room; for of course the Colonel's mistress could not persist in refusing the trifling favour that was asked.

She found Miss Girdlestone sitting up in bed, her face flushed as much with anxiety as fever, though this gave way to a happier expression at the sight of the kind friend who had ministered so tenderly to her during the tedious watches of the night. "I knew you would come!" she said, holding out her hand, with a smile of such sweet trustfulness as went to Maria's very heart. "I would not have had you wake for the world on my account, but I bade nurse watch and waylay you on your way down-stairs—for I could not rest till I had seen you."

Dreading some immediate reference to Frere, Maria interrupted her with an inquiry after her health. "Oh, I am in wretched pain!" she answered; "but it is not that that is making me uneasy—it is not pain I care for, but the helplessness it brings with it. You, at liberty to come and go wherever your fancy leads you, cannot imagine what it is to be here, dependent on the will and discretion of others for every thing I hold most dear."

And then, with some resentment in her tone, she continued, "I don't know how it is, that a matter which appears to me the simplest thing in the world is magnified into a sort of favour. What can be easier than to let Mr. Frere know that I wish to hold a few minutes' conversation with him? At the worst, he can but refuse my request. But when I propose this, trifling as the favour seems, a cloud is immediately perceptible on every body's brow; and so many obstacles and provisoes are thrown in my way, and such a host of difficulties supposed. Good heaven! where is the difficulty? My father, I know, is nervous to a degree; and, besides (peevishly), *he* is afraid of what may be said at home. I do not look to *him* for any independence of conduct. But Mrs. Barclay and Miss Divet, though they are very kind no doubt, and fondle and make much of me, as if I were a petted child, yet I could almost fancy that they were trifling with me," and she looked inquiringly in Maria's face; "for, even while they are promising to do every thing I ask, I observe them consulting each other's looks as if there was some mystery in the way—some mysterious impediment that forbids their speaking openly, either to me or to him. But you—my knowledge of the human countenance will have deceived me strangely, if you have any of their weak timidity—will you, my kind nurse, the guardian angel of the night, will you promise to stand my friend in case their assistance should fail me?"

She looked up more beseechingly than ever as she said this; but Maria, though sorely confused, determined

that no entreaties should induce her to give a promise impossible by *her* to be fulfilled.

While hesitating a moment for a decent excuse, Miss Girdlestone, who reckoned securely upon finding an active friend in Colonel Hussey's affianced bride, produced a small ornament which she had just detached from her bosom, exclaiming earnestly, "Look here—here is a token for you to deliver to him. I would stake my life upon his listening to you when you shew him that. It was the first thing he ever gave me. They forced me to send back all the rest of his presents. But his dear letters and this I kept in spite of them; and it has never left my heart since our unhappy parting, and never should for any purpose but this."

"What is it?" Maria asked in a husky voice, and casting a sinister look at the trinket.

"'Tis only a locket, with our hair and initials intertwined. Nay!" with a face of disappointment, "you are not going to refuse me such a trifle? I will write a little note if you object to speaking to him. I should have sent him one by Mrs. Barclay, only she thought she could prevail more easily with him by speaking herself. But, if you have any scruple about entering on the subject, perhaps I had better write—(poor Frere! he must be sadly altered indeed, since you are all so afraid of him.)"

"It is not that," the other answered; "but Mrs. George is so much more intimate with him, that she would certainly be the fittest person to execute such a commission." Her heart smote her as she spoke thus; for well

she guessed that, from the hand of Kezia, Frere would never receive any reminder of Barbara.

Poor Barbara, chilled and disheartened by a rebuff she had little anticipated, replied with a mortified air, that she would rather not intrust the trinket to Mrs. Barclay. "I am sorry," she added coldly, "that I have asked you to do any thing you think improper. I will enclose it and send it by one of the servants. Or, perhaps, that strange old lady who came to see me last night may condescend to assist me." With a little disdain in her manner—"I should think *she* would not hesitate from any scruples of delicacy."

Maria had resolved not to perjure herself farther in her intercourse with Barbara Girdlestone; for as the rankest falsehood she held it to accept a commission which no earthly consideration could induce her to execute. She had carefully abstained from even touching the gage of love; but at this threat, of having it made over to the resolute hands of cousin Sally, her purpose faltered; and when, as mischance so ordered it, the voice of that stalwart gentlewoman happened to sound from the nearest staircase, as if she was on her way to the very spot where they were communing,—then, grievous to relate!—the small remnant of virtuous forbearance still to be called her own gave way at once. "Give it me!" she cried in haste. "Give me the keepsake, and I will do what I can for you! Not that I promise—remember, Miss Girdlestone, I make no rash promise:" but her hand had grasped the locket, and Barbara was satisfied.

"A hundred thousand thanks!" she exclaimed, resuming all her warmth and sweetness. "The obligation may seem slight to you; but you do not—you cannot conceive how much it is worth to me." There were grateful tears in her beautiful eyes as she turned them on Maria; and then followed a touch of her natural gaiety, for she archly added—"And, my dear Miss Palliser, if you should have the misfortune to fall out with Colonel Hussey—(I think that is his name)—before the happy day arrives, you have only to command my best and most zealous services. Ah! I have offended her again!" she said, as Maria turned away, and without another word, or even look, passed hastily out of the room. "I suppose I ought not to have touched on such a subject with a person who is, after all, a stranger to me. But I am *so* incautious! Well, amongst my other apologies and confessions, I must amuse myself with framing a solemn one for her before she comes to me again. And perhaps a happier aspect may be thrown over every thing by that time—at least if my kind nurse does her bidding as faithfully as I think she will."

CHAPTER XIV.

"Let that be done which Mat doth say,"
"Yea," quoth the Earl, "but not to-day!"

I FANCY it seldom happens that a conspiracy wears, even in the eyes of its most sanguine member, quite as inviting an aspect when surveyed by the full light of morning, as it did at the previous nocturnal meeting of its associates. Many a little under-plot which looked easy and smiling enough while lamp-light only glimmered over its surface, presents unthought-of obstacles, and rugged inequalities, when the sun comes to dart his broad uncompromising rays into each vista and ramification, each hole and corner, of the magnificent scheme.

The Divets, though they harboured some awkward misgivings as to the way their politics were tending, had parted from the newly-admitted member in tolerable spirits; upon the whole, his assured air, as he speculated upon the future, serving to animate their council and disperse them to their several beds in a frame of mind not unbecoming the great undertaking in hand. But, anon, comes the sobering effect of sleep and solitary consideration; and, meeting together in the morning, they offered, by their quiet countenances and subdued manner, a marvellous contrast to the busy, brisk, little

conclave that had "shaken hands upon it" the night before.

The family, fearful of any independent motion that might either lead to the betrayal of their own design, or to some catastrophe equally fatal to it, felt satisfied, by one or two trifling expressions, that Mr. Cranston had not yet made up his mind upon the propriety of Frere's removal. In a tone, therefore, of as much indifference as they could assume, they ventured to advance a few objections of their own; even questioning, in a high-minded style, whether, under all the circumstances, Mr. Frere would not be compromising his dignity by turning his back, craven-like, at the mere approach of his fair enemy. It might really seem to the world as if his friends were afraid that he would be weak enough to fall a victim, a second time, to this young lady's coquettish devices. Kezia especially could not endure the idea of his descending from the high position he now held with respect to those "horrid Girdlestones." And in this line of behavour Mrs. George found herself, somewhat to her surprise, ably supported by no other than the originator of the scheme. Cousin Sally, alike disdainful of subterfuge or explanation, appeared this morning as strenuous an advocate for her deaf friend remaining to "play out the play" at Etheridge, as she had been the previous evening for his instant flight.

With matters of less moment to occupy their thoughts and discourse, the old lady would hardly have escaped from some cutting remarks on the caprice and absurdity of her conduct; but the family affairs standing just then

in so rickety a position, her eccentricities were overlooked as the "crotchets" of "a meddling old woman, who did not know her own mind twelve hours together."

George Barclay might, if he had chosen it, have enlightened them further; for cousin Sally had early that morning confided to him her sudden change of sentiment, and her entire conviction that poor Barbara was not the "idle jade" she had supposed her, but one far more sinned against than sinning; and, as the young lady's beauty and adventures in the market-place had made rather an impression on Barclay, he had listened to what was said with less than his usual apathy, and had encouraged Mrs. Sally's declared intention of doing "something still for the poor girl, in spite of that little Jezabel, Miss Phebe, and your own precious bargain of a wife, Master George."

Richard Cranston, however, had not the least intention of detaining his friend a moment longer under the same roof with Miss Girdlestone than could be avoided. His sole difficulty now, and that which set him musing over the luxuries of the breakfast table—delicately picking and poking at viands that deserved to be carved with despatch, and devoured with a lusty appetite—the sole cause of all this dawdling arose from the difficulty he was under of finding a good excuse for carrying out the proposed measure.

He had been summoned—sent for at a minute's notice—to the manor-house, in that interesting locality to spend all the time he could by any means spare from the duties of his parish; there, and there only, was his presence

required. And now, without having made up so much as a single day on the spot where all Frere's present views and interests were involved, what pretext could he adduce for proposing to leave it? How persuade his friend that the habits and manners of the Divet species might best be studied by leaving Etheredge some fifty miles in their rear, and jogging off post haste to London? He turned the matter this way and that, still unable to form any reasonable pretence for the proposal, short of the absolute falsehood, which his soul abhorred, when a freak of fortune did more for him than it seemed likely he would be able to do for himself.

That morning, on leaving his own room, Cranston had resorted immediately to his friend's, being eager to have some private discourse with him, and sound him about the London journey; but found from that attentive valet of his, Mr. Druce, that, according to his ordinary custom, Frere had walked out before breakfast. On this occasion it was later than usual before he returned to partake of that meal; and, when he did appear, he looked heated and annoyed, and displayed, as his friend Richard had done before him, so little appetite and so much absence of mind, that the conspirators, one and all, looked askance at their neighbour, and murmured anxiously as to the probability of Mr. Manley's having heard something "particular."

Nor were their apprehensions much allayed by seeing the deaf guest, as soon as he had finished his pretence of a breakfast, disappear again through that French window which has already figured in the

machinery of our story, at the same time beckoning Cranston to follow him into the garden.

With uneasiness, not wholly free from a certain sense of guilt, the young rector obeyed the summons; and then the party they had left, anxiously noting every indication of what might be passing between them, observed how earnestly the friends discoursed together as they walked, Mr Frere speaking occasionally with what seemed to their alarmed consciences a peculiar intensity of manner, while Cranston made use of the ivory tablets, or gesticulated in reply.

Possessing in this case a licence, which the Divets were longing for in vain, we will step after them, and ascertain the extent of the supposed mischief.

Frere, hurrying on a few paces till they were out of ear-shot, then began: "A strange thing has happened to me this morning. Who do you think I met, as I was crossing the street? but you will hardly guess."

At this, Richard, who divined something very near the truth, could not prevent himself from changing colour; but Frere himself supplied the answer. "Mr. Girdlestone—*her* father! What can he be doing here, Cranston? for it seemed to me that he was making for this very house; but that, seeing me (for I am confident he did see me, though pretending not), he turned the opposite way, and dived into the first shop he came to. *You* did not know of his being in the neighbourhood, did you? The Divets have not mentioned it by any chance."

Cranston, painfully at a loss how to conduct himself,

executed various signs and contortions of visage, the very awkwardness of which was in his favour, as it allowed Frere to interpret them into the manifestations of an honest, straightforward negative, and still answering; for his friend went on—

"No; of course they have said nothing about it, or you would have told me. But it is singular, is it not, that he should be staying in Etheridge, of all places? For here he must be staying, or he would not have been walking in the High Street at this early hour. Had we met later in the day, I should have concluded that he came over from the Seabrights' at Langton; but it could not have struck eight when I saw him, an hour most unusual for a man of his invalid habits to be even out of bed. It is very odd! I wonder whether any of the family are with him? It is not like him to be travelling alone—quite alone."

Cranston ventured a guilty look as this was said, and then bent his head over the tablets, on which he was preparing to answer—deliberately, however, and not without erasing a word or two as he went on; for, with Frere looking over him, and doubly eager on the present occasion to save time by guessing forward, it was no easy matter to preserve a safe discretion in the affairs of his friend, with still a decent regard to integrity.

He endeavoured to treat the incident with indifference, reminding Frere that Etheridge was a place of some importance in the county, and a hundred things might have obliged Mr. Girdlestone to visit it. In these rail-

way times, the only surprise was *not* to meet with a friend or aquaintance in every place one touched at.

"Of course—of course!" Frere hurriedly rejoined, anticipating the moral of the argument; "but still, to come upon him at this unseasonable hour, and so near the house, too—crossing in the very direction, as if he were making straight towards the Divets' door."

"Are you quite sure you may not have made some mistake?"

"Mistaken in *him?* Impossible! Out of the question entirely!"

Cranston, growing desperate, made a bolder move. "Well, even granting that it *was* Mr. Girdlestone, and that, for some purpose or other, he was in the neigbourhood, of what possible importance to you, my dear Manley, can be his movements, or those of any of his name?" He was going on; but Frere turned from the deliberate writing, and, alas! more deliberate falsehood—

"Yes, yes," he answered; "I know, I feel all this—at least my reason is convinced; but," and he winced, as if some inward wound was rankling, "I would give much that he had stayed away till I was fairly out of the place. Just at this moment, when, if such a thing were possible, I would stifle every old remembrance—forget the past for ever and ever, Cranston!—to have that old familiar figure starting up before me now! Yes, he saw me plainly enough, I could tell that by his manner—the nervous inequality of his step, and the hesitating way in which he turned as my eye met his; and then, as I tell you, darted abruptly into a shop—

an ironmonger's shop, of all imaginable places! Fancy the elegant Mr. Girdlestone clattering amongst pots and pans, or bargaining for a gridiron at eight o'clock in the morning! It must have been no ordinary bugbear that drove him there."

Cranston affected to smile and think it funny, but was checked by the bitterness of expression with which his friend proceeded; all the old feelings seeming to return upon him as he spoke.

"Good heaven!" exclaimed Frere, "to be shunned and run from as a thing intolerable—as an annoyance—a pest! In any case it would be hard to bear: but from him—her father! Why, the circumstances under which we parted, were not of such a character surely as to forbid our interchanging the common courtesies of life when we happened to encounter each other. Friends and associates we could never be again; but to see that gentle, kind-hearted man (for such I used to think him) shrinking away from me as if (instead of being myself the sufferer) I had done him some mortal injury—what can be the meaning of it?"

"It means simply this," Cranston replied; and, believing what he wished to say, his pencil now moved quickly enough—"It means, my dear fellow, that his conscience pricked him at the sight of you, and he turned aside that he might not have the difficulty of accosting one who had been so unpardonably treated by himself and all belonging to him. I can easily comprehend that the timid old man would as soon encounter the glance of a basilisk as the flash of your eye. Or we may take his

conduct in another sense: Mr. Girdlestone may have anticipated your abasing your dignity so far as to meet him on the Queen's highway with fresh proposals for the hand of his daughter—with offers and entreaties, to be graciously suffered to renew your former connection with that flower of female fidelity."

Frere arrested his hand as he wrote the words. "You mistake him, and all of them. I believe they are as far from expecting such a step on my part, as I am from intending it. Yes, exactly," still reading what the other persisted in writing; "it ought, as you say, to be a thing of no moment to me—a matter of the merest indifference; and a few weeks ago it would have affected me less—much less; but now, just as I was resolving to do, what I acknowledge, with you, is probably the best course to be adopted—just at this particular time, it had better not have happened."

Cranston's pencil now dashed freely over the ivory pages, as he poured forth the most cogent arguments he could muster to convince his dear Manley, of the propriety of putting an end to all such doubts and struggles, by immediately offering his hand and heart to Miss Divet.

"I had not intended urging you quite so hotly," he wrote; "merely contemplating, in joining you here, to give a cool, unbiassed opinion of the case you submitted to me, though I do not deny having hoped from the first that it might be favourable to your sweet shepherdess; but now that I am acquainted with her and her excellent family"—Frere interrupted him with a faint

smile, "For how many hours, Dick?" but Cranston went manfully on in defiance of the friendly sarcasm.

"In ordinary instances, I grant you, it would be expedient to pause, and examine a little longer; but rely on one who has ears as well as eyes to serve him, and more than all, my dear Manley, the truest solicitude to sharpen and correct his judgment. Take it then, on *my* assurance, that there is no mistaking these good Divets: *their* characters lie completely on the surface—honest, unpretending, and open as the day! And let me tell you, these qualities alone—virtues so rare in our time—are fully sufficient to atone for far greater deficiencies than I have yet discovered among them: in fact, setting aside that vulgar old woman, and Mrs. Barclay's sulky husband—neither of whom will be of the least consequence to you when you are once out of the Etheridge set—I really see nothing to complain of in point of manners and deportment."

Again, with half-suppressed humour lurking in his face, Mr. Frere consulted that of his friend. "What do you think of my father-in-law?" said he. "Quite *comme il faut*—eh, Richard? Come, now, be upon honour with the deaf, and give us your candid opinion of David."

"As good an old fellow as I would desire to see," was the resolute answer; "and, as for the Patriarch, he would do credit to any court in Europe. And then, after all, what are these persons, these relations of hers, more than adjuncts to the main subject? With regard to the true point of interest, there can be neither doubt

nor hesitation; trust me, my dear friend, no one of the slightest observation or true taste, can be in the company of your sweet little shepherdess five minutes together, without feeling that she, and she alone, was formed to be your future helpmate and companion."

Frere, though he easily mastered the sense of the writing as he looked over the rector's shoulder, yet took the tablets in his hand, and seemed to ponder over their contents. "My sweet shepherdess!" he playfully repeated. "I believe after all, Cranston, she has bewitched you more than me;" and then he proceeded in a more pensive tone. "Poor little Phebe! no, it is from no doubt of her good qualities that I hesitate; she deserves indeed a better—a far, far better lot than I can confer upon her."

Then loitering on a few paces as they retraced their steps to the house, Mr. Frere stopped beneath the window of that very room in which his once loved Barbara was lying helpless and forlorn, with his name upon her lips and his image within her heart. There, as fate would have it, his movements were arrested, and with a countenance which, though he exercised a powerful control over its lineaments, still betrayed something of the conflict working within him, he said, speaking in lower accents—

"The fact is, Richard, that Phebe's very excellences warn me against deciding too hastily: again and again I ask myself (and the question presents itself oftenest when she is the most engaging), is it right? is it fair to this good little creature, who is so eager to sacrifice herself for my sake? is it even permitted in the sight of Heaven

that I, with my thoughts still bent upon another woman, and even yet, as you see, so little master of myself, that the mere sight of her father has conjured up a host of vain and mischievous recollections—is this the temper of mind in which I ought to offer myself to poor Phebe?"

Knitting his brow more energetically than ever, Cranston wrote on—"I cannot believe so ill of you, as to suppose you can long remain uninfluenced by the real superiority of your second choice."

"Excuse me; but the *choice* is entirely on *her* side."

"You shall not interrupt me; my arguments are too sound to be endangered by raillery. As for the idle illusions of memory, they will soon cease to vex you, if you take the only wise and honourable course which is left. Once feel yourself united to a charming and estimable woman, of whose true affection Heaven has given you the most undoubted proofs, and you will give over thinking of her who first touched your fancy."

"My *fancy*?" repeated Frere reproachfully.

"Yes, your fancy! It was your fancy in the former instance which was struck and interested—your eye for the beautiful, and your appreciation of female accomplishments"——

"I will spare you the enumeration of Barbara's—comparisons are better avoided. And yet there *is* a question or two I wanted to ask you—What sort of voice (speaking voice, I mean) is Phebe's? it is so difficult to discriminate tones and accents when they reach you only through the medium of some mechanical

contrivance, or when the voice is unnaturally pitched. In fact, when she is with me, I always prefer her pretty little eyes or hands to any other mode of conversing."

Richard Cranston solemnly pledged himself for the young lady's possessing an unexceptionable organ of sound—a voice sweet, clear, and slightly girlish, such as was suited to her diminutive but graceful proportions.

"She sings, too?" said Frere inquiringly.

"It may be so; but of course I have not had the opportunity yet of hearing her."

"I thought, when I left you last night, you might have had a little music."

"Ha!" said Cranston to himself, conscious how differently he was then occupied.

"To tell yon the truth, Dick," Frere continued confidentially—"I don't much admire the style of songs I have occasionally noticed on her piano."

"Nothing improper, I trust?" the young rector gravely inquired.

"No—Reverendissimus! nothing improper in your saintly sense of the word; but, musically speaking, highly objectionable; trifling and commonplace—with pictures on their title-pages—some of them coloured! all which implies a low, provincial taste, far worse than no taste and no music at all."

"Now, what can it signify to him, poor fellow?" was Cranston's inward remark; and Frere, catching the expression of his face, interpreted his look as Sir Roger de Coverley used to translate those of the Spectator.

"Exactly so! 'He's deaf, poor wretch, and cannot

hear;' and if his lady-love should screech like a peahen, or hoot like an owl, it will be equally indifferent to him! Quite true, my dear Richard! For me, must time and tune be evermore classed amongst the wonders of antiquity: still I should not like a wife of mine to be excruciating the ears of my company."

"Always bear in mind that few of your guests would be half as hypercritical as you yourself. Besides, when the lady is actually your own property, you may interdict her musical efforts altogether. Loving you, heart and soul, as you know she does, what can be easier?"

"And is that any argument, you barbarian! for inducing her to give it up? Is it because the dear little thing does me the unaccountable favour of setting her affections upon me, that I should restrict her from one of her favourite amusements? Cranston, I didn't believe you were such a brute!"

"Well, then, to make sure of her intonation, and all the rest of it, give her some Italian master, or the last celebrity of the German school—if you like that better; and set her practising from morning till night, till you think these scientific friends of yours will be satisfied. Ah, Manley! take care I do not retort the epithet 'unfeeling' upon you—I can hardly bear to jest upon a subject which to me is scarcely less than sacred. See, where she comes to meet us!" he added, as Phebe issued from the house, which they were slowly approaching—"Look at that young and spotless being, who has consecrated to you the earliest and warmest affections of her nature:

Observe her as she *ought* to be observed, and then direct your raillery any where but there!"

Frere glanced his eyes over his friend's exhortation, and did grow serious upon it. "Yes, poor child," he said; "here indeed she comes, little dreaming how she is interested in our talk!"

"And why should she be any longer kept in ignorance of your intention?" Cranston eagerly wrote. "Why delay another second the completion of her felicity? Think, my dear fellow, of the happiness, pure and overflowing, which you have it in your power to confer, and do not, for the sake of sweet charity, dally with your enviable fate! Go, Frere, propose to her at once."

"What, now?" said the other with a startled look; and then shrinking in spirit, as it were, he cried, "No, Cranston, no! not a second time in person: it would be too like—yet all too *unlike!* No, this time it must be done in writing, if done at all."

Cranston lost not an instant in seizing the advantage thus opened to him, of urging the plan he had been so anxious to propose. "Absent yourself then for the purpose," he wrote, "for there can be nothing to keep you here. I am really very anxious to be in London on business of my mother's, which I have only put off in deference to your wish of having me here. Let us go up together; and, by following my advice when we get there, afford me the pleasure of reflecting that I have been made the humble instrument of forwarding your eventual happiness."

"Are you really in earnest?" inquired Frere, raising his eyes from the writing to consult the face of the inditer thereof.

"Never more serious in my life. I would have you go off this very morning—this hour, if possible; for a very short time will suffice for that clever man of yours to pack up what is necessary. *She* will mourn your departure, no doubt; but picture to yourself the joy to come, the delight which will be shed abroad over this excellent and deserving family, when your intentions are declared. See, she calls the dog to follow her,—innocent, unconscious girl! I behold in your little shepherdess all the simplicity of a child, united with the bright intelligence of womanhood."

"And she really appears all this to you?"

"Upon my honour she does! sluggard that you are, not to make more haste in securing such a prizeless treasure."

In spite of these pressing instances, Frere, however, did not move very fast to meet his shepherdess, though his countenance softened perceptibly as she and his dogs came bounding and playing together across the lawn. To see Phebe thus accompanied, could hardly fail to excite a smile of roguish intelligence between the young men. She came to give some trifling message of Kezia's to the deaf guest; and, in expressing it in her own arch way, all sign of gravity was soon dispelled, and the trio making merry as they went, the pleasant echo of their mirth and laughter was wafted on the morning air even to the very pillow of poor Barbara. The voices were

not near enough to allow her to distinguish any one in particular, yet she rose up to listen with earnest attention; and, as the sound was lost in the distance, the poor patient laid herself down again with a melancholy sigh. Whoever might be included in that group of listeners under her window, their gaiety made her sick-room seem but the more silent and dreary.

"Those little white hands will soon have a respite from toil, Phebe," the deaf guest was saying, as he looked down upon the busy fingers that were so hard at work to enlighten him. "If you can believe it, I am going to London: this despotic friend of mine lays his stern command upon me; and we are to be off, I verily believe, if he has his own way, by the very next train which leaves Etheridge. My little shepherdess must have bribed him to force me away; for, of course, she will rejoice at getting rid of her troublesome visiter?"

It was a natural blush which rose to Phebe's cheek as Frere spoke thus, though the source of her emotion was very different from any thing he attributed to her.

Of course, Miss Divet failed not to improve so manifest an occasion for the display of such feelings as might best flatter and interest the departing guest. Surprise, consternation, and a world of tender regrets and soft upbraidings, seemed struggling in her girlish bosom and speaking in her eyes. She was "sure he would never come back to them;" this was the burthen of her lament. "No, if he left them now, they would never see him again! What was there to entice him back to

Etheridge? that stupid place, that he must have been tired of long and long ago."

In mentioning his intended departure, there had been something in Frere's manner which had inspired Phebe with a hope, that even now he might be brought to the desired point before he left the house. "It would be such a triumph; and render her office of Sister of Mercy so delicious!" But this glorious consummation to the family plot was still to be withheld: the little ray of positive tenderness subsided into an indulgent smile, and was not to be rekindled by any trickery of hers. With infinite composure and—as Phebe construed it—perfect indifference, he left her, in the midst of her lamentations, to prepare for his journey, and give his own directions to Druce.

Then, as Frere quitted the room, Mr. Cranston, with the most aggravating self-complacency—the mortified Divets could call it by no other name—appealed to them—to *them*, of all others, for approbation of the dexterity he had manifested in leading his dear Manley to the point so much desired by them all.

Keeping in view the circumstances under which the intimacy of these two young men had ripened, and the sort of friendly dominion which Frere's high spirits and social position had naturally given him over his graver and less prosperous comrade, some mental giddiness, or some slight inebriation of the reasoning faculties, may be expected to overtake Richard Cranston when he beholds every thing so strangely reversed. In his boyish days he had occasionally been jeered, in a tone not alto-

gether agreeable to his feelings, for allowing Manley Frere so completely to take the lead; and since then, his affectionate parent, notwithstanding her prospective glances in the direction of Micklesham-Basset, had launched many a pointed sarcasm at the incumbent of Sheen for being so domineered over, so "eternally at the beck and call" of that "prodigious great friend of his." "I am sure it surprises me, Richard, that you can submit to be bullied, and ordered up hill and down dale, and made such a mere catspaw, by a man younger by at least two years than yourself—when, if ever your poor mother ventures a word of advice to you, see what an ungrateful reception it is sure to meet with!"

The welfare of his bosom friend appears to Cranston the sole object for which he labours. Wholly unsuspected by his excellent self, lies the crude grain of egotism which renders his exertions a personal and selfish gratification; yet there it is, notwithstanding. For imagine what it must be to him to find himself, through a sudden turn of events, installed at one stroke as chief counsel, guide, and protector, of this once predominating power, and implored, in the name of their long and faithful intercourse, to sanction and confirm the most delicate and important transaction that can happen in the life of man.

Nor is his influence limited to Mr. Frere: through, this foremost object of his solicitude, he sees it extending to others, yet unconscious of its presence and power —the circle widening, till it embraces some half-dozen souls, all more or less interested in his controlling genius,

amongst whom two charming young ladies stand pre-eminently distinguished. Who that has any knowledge of the human heart can wonder to find Richard Cranston, self-flattered and self-deceived, and grown so reliant on the sharpness of his discernment, that he suffers it, when its activity is most required, to lie hoodwinked and all inert. Had he proceeded to the investigation of the case with his former humility and self-distrust, he could hardly have failed of observing much which was now passed over with a faulty indulgence, or hidden from him altogether. Some suspicion would surely have arisen as to the merits of the family he was patronising with such hasty zeal—some suspicion even of the great plot itself.

Did we survey this gentleman as working and blundering only on his own account, and for his private interest and recreation, we might amuse ourselves with the development of those consequences which may suffice some day to correct his present presumption; but Cranston will be but one of the secondary victims implicated in this series of mistakes: the chief sufferer, and he who least deserves such a penalty, must be the one to rue most heavily the rashness and obtusity of his friend's bewildered judgment.

As the hour of travel approached, the manor-house began to take that sort of aspect which the departure of guests, be they welcome or unwelcome, seldom fails of producing. On such occasions, the family, disturbed from its usual after-breakfast habits, congregates idly together, or lounges about with looks of quiet expecta-

tion, for it is of no use to go about their business till such an one is actually off; and luggage is brought down, and servants are on the alert, some of whom, though revolving generally in a more distant orbit, find it advisable to happen to be in the way just at the instant the "said such an one" is leaving their master's hospitable roof.

At the Etheridge mansion, the sight of Mr. Frere's packages, lying ready near the entrance door, is scarcely more indicative of a departure than that of the Patriarch's venerable form; who, for the convenience of being at hand to take the latest farewell of his "dear young friend," has deserted his customary promenade on the terrace, and is now taking his morning's exercise, by walking up and down the hall of the spacious old house; the sarcastic smile which puckers his wrinkles out of their usual repose, serving to shew that, while sharing in the common mortification of his family, he promises himself nevertheless some amount of amusement, in gently taunting and twitting them with the mistaken labour and unfortunate success of their efforts. And the Divets' occupation is indeed o'er—not merely for this morning, but for days to come!

With the flight of the deaf guest ends all the importance which his presence in the house, and that alone, conferred upon his old love. Yesterday, some thought or reference to Miss Girdlestone mingled with every subject, and seemed to regulate every movement of the family: to-day, the near prospect of Frere's departure extinguishes both apprehension and interest. As soon

as the street-door closes upon him, the fair patient will be to them no other than an ordinary inmate, whom ill-luck has cast upon their hospitality—to be accommodated with outward courtesy so long as it suits her to stay, and then dismissed with easy indifference, as one who is little likely to cross their path again for weal or woe.

So strongly do these considerations work with them, that Phebe and her sister have no longer any hesitation in leaving old Spicer sole manager and attendant in the sick-room, while they come down to wish Mr. Frere a pleasant journey; for, whether his absence is to be for a week or for ever, that ceremony cannot be dispensed with. To such an extent are they grown careless of possible contingencies, that they had very nearly omitted warning the old woman against making Barbara acquainted with the impending departure of Mr. Frere till he was actually out of the house. It would be unwise, impolitic to themselves, and unfeeling towards the young lady, to mention a circumstance so certain to agitate her nerves.

And thus, anticipating the probable extinction of their own hopes, the ruin of poor Barbara's was surveyed with languid indifference. But there was another of the household, whose vigilance, springing from love and not from interest, allowed her no interval of repose.

However favourable might be present appearances, no perfect security could be enjoyed by Colonel Hussey's well-beloved so long as Frere and Barbara Girdlestone breathed the same atmosphere; and, with the events of the night still fresh in her memory, it was impossible to

observe the behaviour of Mrs. Sarah without an uneasy conviction that, even at this late hour, some turn of fortune—some dire mischance—might be impending. Twice had cousin Sally been heard to call herself "an officious old fool for meddling with what did not concern her;" and her jolly breadth of visage, instead of its usual careless contentment, was marked with the lines of vexation and distrust.

Then she was scarcely quiet for two seconds together, but kept stumping up and down stairs, going in and out of Miss Girdlestone's room, or hovering about its vicinity, in a manner which, to any one cognizant of the old lady's "antecedents," was strongly indicative of some private purpose, awaiting only a convenient opportunity for unequivocal display.

As matters were then situated, this invalid chamber was the very last portion of the Etheridge mansion that Maria could desire to approach; yet, being the sole depository of Mrs. Sarah's change of feeling towards the beautiful Barbara, it behoved her to keep a strict watch over the movements of that eccentric individual.

To have divulged both her information and suspicions to the public, would have been the readiest and most direct way of preventing mischief from this dreaded quarter; but, as usual, Maria shrank from any positive connivance with the Divets. With a strange contradiction, a delicacy more fantastic than real, she shunned any under-hand dealings with these people, although the sole alternative remaining to her, if she wished to attain the end proposed, and defeat the common ad-

versary, was to assume in her own stately person the degrading character of a spy.

As long as Phebe or her still more efficient sister remained with the invalid, Maria judged there was little to be apprehended; but, seeing them descend together in careless security, it became especially desirable, even at the hazard of losing the last glimpse of Mr. Frere, and missing perhaps some precious testimony of his feelings—all paramount was the obligation, even with this possible sacrifice in view, to ascertain with certainty how cousin Sally was comporting herself in the mean time.

Without the delay of another second, therefore, she ascended to Miss Girdlestone's room, and pushing the door, which happened to be ajar, beheld, as she had expected, Mrs. Sarah and the invalid in close con versation.

Finding the coast clear at last of all important obstacles, cousin Sally had despatched old Spicer on some pretended errand, and had then made Barbara acquainted with the intended departure of Frere; warning her that there was no time to lose if she wished to see him before he went, and promising that, if she would make her request in writing, she—Mrs. Sarah—would put the letter into his own hands.

With a very natural and dignified feeling, the advice was at first rejected; for Barbara was deeply mortified at this sudden resolution of Frere's. It could be only her presence in the house that was driving him from it; and, as he was so determined against even the chance of

their meeting, she would do nothing to forward it. But Mrs. Sally, adroitly suppressing all allusion to the Divets, threw the whole weight and responsibility of the project upon Frere's reverend friend, asserting that Mr. Manley would never have thought of such a thing, if it hadn't been for "that nasty little parson he was so fond of"—and Barbara, not hard to be ruled where her inclinations so warmly prompted her, was willing to believe that it was indeed the adverse influence of this prejudiced man, and not the free dictate of Frere's own heart, which was tempting him to fly from her.

Writing materials were fortunately at hand, and with these the fair invalid was busily engaged, when Maria Palliser, resigning her better principles at the instigation of selfish passion, descended to one of the basest of mortal actions, and stood a prying eavesdropper at her door. The actual words which passed between the earnest couple at the bed could not reach Maria's ears; but the looks and gestures—the tone of appeal on one side, and that of rough and ready encouragement on the other—above all, the hurried folding of the note, and its delivery into the eager hands of Mrs. Sally. There was no need to apply the skeleton-key any longer; the lock of their secret was picked, and Maria, sick with apprehension, yet desperately resolved, crept stealthily from her lurking-place, and then, running the rest of the way with almost headlong haste, might immediately have been seen in earnest conference with no less a person than the Patriarch himself.

Truly the times must have been strangely out of joint

at the Etheridge mansion, when above stairs there was the delicate Barbara Girdlestone making a bosom friend of Mistress Sarah Barclay; and below, was the haughty Miss Palliser whispering and "colloguing" with the being whom, of all others, she professed to hold in the deepest abhorrence; to which curious, and rather disgraceful, anomalies we have only to quote the observation of Master Puck—

> "Cupid is a knavish lad,
> Thus to make poor females mad."

"Yes, that will do it, Miss G.," cousin Sally was just saying, as Maria's shadow flitted across the doorway. "Just make an end of your billy-do, and tip him your sign-manual, so that there can be no mistake about it; and then, if I don't do your business in a brace of shakes, say my name isn't Sally Barclay, that's all. There, never mind wafering it—there's no time for that sort of trumpery; do you turn down the corner, and I'll promise not to peep!"

"Dear madam, you may read every word of it—for indeed, indeed I regard you as the truest friend I ever had!"

"Humph!" grumbled the old lady rather conscience-struck, "there may be two words to that matter, perhaps. But never mind, Miss G.; we won't say die yet. Keep up your spirits, that's all you've got to do now; and don't cry enough to make your nose red before he comes to see you."

Barbara smiled through her tears, as if to show that

she was not above taking reasonable advice; and her zealous friend scuttled out of the chamber, meaning to go straight to Manley Frere, and wherever he might be, or by whomsoever accompanied, to insist on delivering her credentials into his own hand. A very brief survey of what was proceeding below stairs, convinced her that the deaf guest had not yet issued from his room. Peeping over the banisters, she could see Druce still busying himself about the packages lying in the hall, his deliberate movements seeming to intimate that there was still time to spare. Old Divet, also leaning on his staff, was nearly were she had left him, except that Miss Palliser and he were now having a little talk together.

"All's safe at present," thought the old lady; "the carriage isn't brought round yet. And now I'll bring my pigs to market, or I'll see the reason why;" and, looking no more to the right or the left, she resolutely jogged on in the direction of Frere's apartments. "Now I shall circumnavigate them with a witness; and all the easier, perhaps, that that sly chap Master Druce won't be at hand to spoil sport. Mercy on us! What a row and a rumpus there will be amongst the whole pack, when they find out the tricks I've been after! They'll be ready to beat me!" and cousin Sally, though sensible of some compunction for the Divets, could not help chuckling a little over their impending discomfiture. "They all fancy themselves so mighty clever," she thought, "that I sha'n't be sorry to show them all that I'm a match for them yet."

Mrs. Sarah took it for granted that, when she had reached Mr. Frere's dressing-room unseen and unmolested, her mission must be all but accomplished. But the deaf guest had acquired a habit of bolting his door, originally adopted to screen him from the intrusion—at one time so frequent—of Divet and his law-papers. "The tenements in Pimlico," David's happy resource when bent on mystifying his lodger, had had no small share in the shooting of that bolt. It was a foolish custom of Manley Frere's, considering his peculiar infirmity, and, like most bad habits, had unfortunately survived the occasion which gave rise to it.

Here, then, after vainly drumming at the door to arouse the deaf man's notice, Mrs. Sally, relying on her years and reputation, boldly tried the lock, and discovered to her vexation that it was fastened within.

"Well, at all events, he must be there," she thought after a moment's consideration; "and he can't get out without my seeing him—that's one comfort. I shall nab him still, in spite of those cousins of mine. And, if the whole gang of them was coming up those stairs at this very instant, it should not prevent his getting what I've got for him in my pocket."

Nearly opposite the chamber of Mr. Frere was a small room which George Barclay called his workshop, where, amidst a world of litter, as forlorn and ill-conditioned as himself, he kept his sporting apparatus, and where he was at this moment occupied in putting his fishing tackle in order.

Now, the manual exercise which cousin Sally was

performing so vigorously on the panels of the opposite door, though all unheard by the person within, could hardly fail to excite the attention of Kezia's husband.

"What's the row, Sally?" he drawled out as he strolled into the passage, half intent on the rod he was trying to mend, and addressing her with his usual yawn.

Then, observing her start at his voice, he asked, "What mischief she was brewing to be so easily scared?"

"No mischief in the case, Master Georgey—not a bit of it. But look here, my boy;" and, keeping an eye on the opposite premises, Mrs. Sarah accompanied the young man into his den, to while away the time she had to wait, by opening her heart to so trusty a confidant—"See, George, what I've got here."

"What is it? A challenge?" said he—"a cartel of defiance, Sally? I have seen you looking very fierce all the morning."

"Guess again, cousin Barclay. Why, you booby, it's a billy-do from that poor lovelorn thing there, that your precious folks are trying to bamboozle. She wants me to give it to her deaf darling; and, please the pigs, he shall not go down-stairs till he reads it."

Barclay cast an eye of some interest, but more despondency, on the tender document, which his old friend was displaying so confidently. "You are a bold woman," he said, "to engage with them all single-handed. But it won't do, cousin Sally; you will never carry it out. They will be one too many for you yet!"

"You are a chicken-hearted fellow, George; not fit to say 'bo' to a goose. Why, don't you see, I've managed the matter so cleverly that nobody knows a word about it down below. And as for him, poor dear soul," directing a glance at Frere's door—"as for him, I've got him there as snug as a rat in a trap. The moment he pops out of his hole I have at him! He mayn't condescend to give Miss What's-her-name the meeting she has set her little heart upon; for you he-fellows, Master Georgey, are rum jockeys to deal with when you take to your tantrums. But, anyhow, I'll see that he has the choice."

"Ah! it's all very fine," he answered; "but they'll hit on some device or other to give you the sack, depend on that, Sally. Don't flatter yourself your talent for intrigue is equal to that of any member of this household. Old Spicer herself, stupid as she is, would be more than a match for you at that sort of thing. But I promise my hearty congratulations if you really *should* contrive to spring your mine before they are aware of it. I say, Sally," as she was moving away, "you don't happen to have such a thing as a glue-pot in a corner of your pocket? I know it is a capacious garment, and the articles in which it abounds are generally more for use than ornament. A yard or two of twine might do for the present, if the glue should not be forthcoming."

Obeying the request, Mrs. Sarah dived deep into the recesses of a pocket, the shape and dimensions of which had descended to her from more generations than one;

still shuffling off, however, while she continued her search, in order to push the door back, and keep her look-out on the opposite room unobstructed.

"Here it is, my boy!" she said, producing at length a very substantial coil of pack-thread—"Take it, George, for I must go now, and be ready to pounce upon him as soon as he pokes his nose out. Lord! What a bore it is, poor fellow, that he never can hear a word that's said to him! Hang this rickety door of yours—it won't stand open a moment! I say George, I shall give you another hail presently, and let you know how I get on."

"Do, Sally!" he replied, finishing off a long-drawn gape. "Why, what's the matter now, old lady? Are you trying to break my door down?"

"No, but the plague of a thing has slammed to, and I can't open it—there's such a draught up the passage. Confound the door, I say! It sticks like cobbler's wax—and that fellow may be down-stairs, and off now before I can get at him!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Barclay, and he threw down his work and came to her assistance with a vivacity unusual to him. A strong sou'-wester might perhaps have closed the door; but what breeze amongst all the treasures of old Eolus could be causing the key to turn in the lock? that key which, by an unlucky chance, happened to stand outside the door, and was not yet too rusty to be past service. He heard it grating and grinding as it was cautiously turned; and, before Mrs. Sarah was thoroughly aroused to her danger, the bolt

was securely drawn, and the door stood immovable! One vigorous shake the old lady gave it when she found her gentler efforts set at nought; but then came a murmur of whispering voices from without, accompanied with insulting laughter and a long-drawn "h-i-ss," in the midst of which the click of the Patriarch's staff might plainly be heard as he receded leisurely along the passage. Poor Mrs. Sarah! her face, scarlet with shame and disappointment, turned a lamentable look upon her friend and fellow-prisoner.

"Done brown, cousin Sally!" he simply said. "I told you how it would be."

"Dished, by jingo, George, my boy!" was the old lady's angry rejoinder, matching his modern slang with the cant language of her younger days.

"Yes," he added, listening with an excited look; "and by Jove they have done it just in time too, for there's Manley Frere coming out at this very moment! It is his door that is creaking; I know the sound well enough, though *he* can't hear it, poor fellow! any more than he can your voice, cousin Sally."

"Not hear my voice! But I'll make him hear it, George Barclay;" and the old lady, arousing from her momentary discouragement, rushed manfully at the door. "They sha'n't get the whip-hand of me, see if they do!" and she began rattling the door, and shouting at the height of a voice which had often made itself intelligible to Frere when every other in the house was proving inefficient. Now, however, through the artful precaution of her adversaries, cousin Sally's full

round tones were muffled and subdued, and, if they reached him at all, saluted him merely as one of those internal murmurs which are so apt to haunt the deaf, and form one of their peculiar trials. He was thoroughly accustomed to such imaginary sounds; sometimes they would be moaning around him like the howling or sighing of the wind, or the monotonous dashing of the sea over a shingly beach, or it would be the jingling of glasses or bells, that were for ever out of tune; and if now the demon of deafness spake to him as in the distant voice of Mrs. Sarah—why, the very words she poured out in her fiery wrath could only confirm his belief that he was being visited by one of the old illusions under a fantastic variation; for why should that starling's cry of "Let me out!" be floating along the quiet passage? or, looking around on the bland faces which met him as he entered it—Kezia's matronly solicitude, or the tender pout of his sweet shepherdess—how could Mr. Frere put any faith in the blighted sense which strove to persuade him that there was really a cry of "thieves" and "fire" in his ears; and that his own name was woven into and made part of the improbable echo?

Such a tumult, had it actually come to pass in a well-ordered house like the Divets, must have been creating the utmost perturbation, whereas every thing here had the air of being as calm and undisturbed as usual.

The Divets, having thus far circumvented their false ally, would have been at no loss for some story prompt for the occasion, had Frere's suspicions been ever so

fully awakened; but they saw that, in his case, no stratagem was called for, and they might keep all their ingenuity to baffle the quicker perception of Mr. Cranston, who came running up-stairs to hurry his friend's more deliberate proceedings.

Before Frere's guardian angel, therefore, could utter a question relating to the hubbub which was resounding along the corridor—the knockings, the thumpings, and shrieks for help—the ladies were ready for him.

"Dear Mr. Cranston, do you hear the noise our old friend is making? Do listen to cousin Sally! Ah! you may well stare to hear such an uproar—such an unseemly disturbance in our abode of peace and unanimity! But you must know that grandpapa has just been playing off a practical joke upon this eccentric cousin of ours. The dear old man has such a turn for humour — his spirits have all the elasticity of youth!"

"And his heart the innocence of childhood!" Phebe chimed in, with a look at her sister; which the other, returning, added—

"Precisely, dear! Our Patriarch is never more in his element than when he is playing off some ingenious little stratagem, some good-natured piece of pleasantry, like the present." All which was admirably borne out by the old gentleman's chuckle of exultation when they overtook him on the next landing.

"P-o-o-r cousin Sally!" said he; "the old lady is raising a sad disturbance above stairs, my dears—ha, ha! treating us to the view-hollo even before she has

unearthed the fox, I reckon—eh? Ha, p-o-o-r Sally! Dear—dear—dear!"

The tumult he referred to, however, had by this time wholly subsided. George Barclay, broken-spirited and easily depressed, would have given up the day as irretrievable, and gone back to his work only a little more sulky and crestfallen than usual; but the female prisoner was formed of very different materials. No sooner had cousin Sally convinced herself that her efforts upon the door were utterly purposeless, than she turned her whole attention to the window.

A former slight acquaintance of ours, Abraham the helper, was working at no great distance in the garden, and to him the old lady shouted in her highest key, bidding him run for his life to the gardener, and tell him to come directly, and bring his ladder along with him. "They've locked me up here, Abraham, and it shall be worth half-a-crown to you, and another to the gardener, if you can only manage to get me out."

No fear that, thus inspired, any difficulty should be made in fulfilling cousin Sally's behests. "Old Adam's likeness" was only a little way off, trimming the vine which half-clothed that quarter of the mansion: he was an active, lively young fellow, fully awake to the twofold temptation—the bribe and the fun—so frankly tendered for his acceptance.

In one second he was at the bottom of the ladder, and in two or three more that ladder was fixed against the window where Mrs. Sally stood gesticulating.

"That's it, Robins! that's the very thing, my man! That fellow's worth his weight in gold, George."

"Why, you are not such a hare-brained old goose, surely, Sally? You'll never get down safe; you'll do yourself a mischief, I tell you: upon my soul you will!"

"I'll do it if I break every bone in my skin," was the resolute reply. "George Barclay" (waxing solemn as the moment of action drew nigh), "if I break my neck getting down that ladder, the thing shall be done."

"No no!" said he laughing, as he looked out to measure the distance. "No, no! take care of yourself whatever you do; remember you are the best friend I have in the world, and I can't afford to lose you—I cannot indeed, Sally!"

"God bless you, my boy! I've left you a nice little legacy in my will; and, if I get safe to the bottom, I'll pop in a codicil that shall double it: if I don't, never trust me! That'll do nicely—fits to a T, Robins! Now, Abraham, you stand on the other side of the steps, and be sure you hold them steady; so, give us a lift, Georgy—there, that's the right thing;" and, with Barclay's help, she scrambled out of the window. "All right and tight below, Robins?"

"Ay, ay, ma'm; we'll take care of you, never fear!"

"Keep it steady at top, George, my boy; and here we go up, up, up—and there we go down, down, downy!" and, once securely perched upon the ladder, the old lady descended with an activity more commensurate with her character than her years.

Barclay watched her anxiously when she was beyond

the reach of his arm, and joined her in a hearty cheer as soon as he beheld her safe on terra firma. Then, as it appeared vastly too much trouble for him to follow her spirited example, he contented himself with sending his good wishes after the eccentric Sally, while he resumed his dawdling efforts at mending the broken fishing-rod; accompanying the work with an occasional whistle, which, in order to be truly emblematical of the performer, was apt to lag in the time, and to be more in the minor key than was good for it.

Presently there came a gap in the doleful ditty, for he heard cousin Sally's voice at the door; but this time sending forth, alas! no shout of triumph—no note of exultation!

"Just as you said, George; they have been one too many for us, and be hanged to them! By the time I had scudded round to the front of the house, he and that prig of a parson were off and out of sight: and so I have ventured my neck and spent my money like an old fool, and all to no purpose but to get myself laughed at, as I deserve."

"Never mind, Sally, don't take it to heart; it is no disgrace to an honest woman to be floored by a houseful of rogues."

"No more it is, my boy; and I'll pay my half-crowns without grumbling, and be sure to remember the codicil, George."

"Ay, ay, Sally; stick to that by all manner of means."

Of Mr. Frere's final exit from Etheridge manor-house little remains to be added to Mrs. Sarah's brief announce-

ment, except as it proved the occasion of displaying a contrast between two of the fair ladies he was leaving behind him, who seemed to have changed characters for the nonce to a degree somewhat remarkable: the air of lively intelligence, the glancing eye, and restless movements—all until now the portion of the little Divet—being suddenly transferred to the cold and sedate Miss Palliser; while Frere's shepherdess, with her heart torn with rage and disgust against the man who had given her such useless trouble, and whom she saw in the very act of escaping from her toils, lost every trace of the joyous, careless creature she had hitherto striven to appear.

And yet so whimsical was that power which was working unseen on behalf of the confederates, that though little Miss Divet had never looked more unamiable, and bordering on the ugly, than she did at the parting moment; both gentlemen—the one flattered on his own account, the other for the sake of his friend—beheld her as an epitome and example of all that was most interesting and attractive in woman. Versed, as they esteemed themselves, in the mystery of her feelings, all the spleen and vexation perceptible in that once smiling face were to them but so many indisputable witnesses of Phebe's affectionate and open character. The "innocent young thing," the "true child of nature," was no practised woman of the world, skilful to cover her young features with the mask of dissimulation, and hide the honest workings of a heart never touched until the deaf guest had been lucky enough to kindle its pure

affections; and Frere, while, true to his original purpose, he suffered no outward demonstration to escape him, could not survey those tears of spite, and those very sullen poutings, without feeling every kindly sentiment towards his little shepherdess freshly and gratefully confirmed. With *such* a heart, and a character so unspotted by the world, what might he not make of her!

Of course, these sentiments were duly reciprocated by Mr. Cranston; and, assuming to himself the chief merit of the striking finale then and there exhibited, the style in which he executed his parting compliments became so gay and debonair—so significant, in short, of what was passing in his mind—that Phebe afterwards declared she had longed to tear "his reverend eyes" out of his "frightful little head." And Kezia herself—the prudent and circumspect Kezia—had to clench her fingers and grind her teeth a little, before she could keep her resolution quite up to the mark, and preserve her equanimity to the very close of this most mortifying chapter.

In paying his final adieux, it was evident that the deaf guest missed some members of a family amongst whom he had been so intimately, and on the whole so pleasantly, domesticated; and Mr. Frere's nature was not one of those that can part with familiar faces as carelessly as though they were but the ordinary furniture of the house. He might satisfy himself with leaving suitable remembrances for the eccentric Mrs. Sarah, his faithful ally (how faithful he little guessed!)—but

Colonel Hussey's fair betrothed, whom it well might happen to him that he should never meet again, he would fain say "good-bye" to her; and, though Cranston's expressive signals urged him to be gone, he, caring not whether he went to London this hour or the next, still lingered and looked round.

Maria, in the meanwhile, loath to be left quite unnoticed, and yet afraid, if she ventured under the public eye, of betraying some of the emotion which was depriving her of her usual self-command, was still near enough to catch the sound of her own name.

"Miss Palliser—Maria—Maria, my dear—Mr. Frere is asking for you!"

Thus, specially summoned, all doubt and hesitation passed away, and she hurried amongst the assembled group; now only fearing she might be too late.

Frere met her as she advanced, and, taking both her hands (he observed not how they were trembling) in his, whispered some precious words: for "precious" she knew they must be!—all that at such a time, and in such a presence, he could or ought to say.

But Frere's voice was low, and, moreover, well nigh overpowered in the louder tones of Mr. Cranston, whose spirits were effervescing in an ill-timed loquacity. It was, therefore, rather the cadence of his speech, than the sense conveyed by it, which brought such a flood of joy upon Maria. And, in truth, had she known the full purport of his brief address, consisting simply in very friendly wishes for her future happiness; possessed as she was with one predominant error, there would

doubtless have been found some means of interpreting it according to her fancy.

And now the adieux were interchanged, and, the genius of intrigue having triumphed so far, the gentlemen departed.

The carriage which was to convey them and their luggage to the station had gone but a few paces, when Frere turned round to wave a parting salute to his shepherdess; doubting little, poor simple soul! that she would be the very last to lose sight of him. But the Divets, one and all, had disappeared within doors; Miss Palliser alone was visible.

It is a common remark that, when persons of constitutional reserve are betrayed by any sudden excitement into laying aside the calmness and decorum of their daily manners, they are sure to give way to the unwonted impulse more recklessly, and with less attention to appearances, than those who possess not half their habitual caution.

There stood Maria, leaning over the iron rail which bounded the broad steps of the mansion—the very identical spot where we and old Tuffnel have watched her exchanging parting benedictions with her lawful lover, the good Colonel of artillery. But, ah me! with what a different aspect! The inspiration of an absorbing passion, which at that moment she made no effort to conceal, flashed in her eyes, and lighted up every feature of her fine countenance. Not Barbara Girdlestone, in all her pride of beauty and security of conquest; nor Phebe Divet, confident in the power of her youthful

charms—had ever displayed a face more fervent in its expression of heartfelt regard, more animated, and yet more tender!

Struck with the unwonted vivacity and graceful freedom of her attitude, Mr. Frère arose from his seat, and taking off his hat—a good old fashion fast going into disuse (yet pardon him, ye free and easy of the present day, for, the lady standing there unbonneted, the gentleman could scarcely do less)—uncovering, then he saluted her with all that frank and cordial grace which had impressed her so favourably even on their earliest acquaintance.

The young rector also looked back, and was so plainly startled out of all clerical composure by such a sudden illumination of Miss Palliser's charms, that Frere, construing the motion of his lips into something—as it really was—highly complimentary to the lady, said laughingly—"Oh, *you* too have discovered the Colonel's fair one to be worth looking at, have you? I told you what a fortunate fellow he was."

"A handsome woman undoubtedly—remarkably so!" said Cranston to himself; "but as for the Colonel's luck, why—well—*that's* as hereafter may be."

And so the young men passed onward through Etheridge town, and were soon a score of miles from that goodly old mansion where our scene has been chiefly laid; and which, with its substantial walls and freedom from every vestige of stucco and false ornament, was surely a most inappropriate theatre for the base intrigue and double-dealing enacted within it.

CHAPTER XV.

ANOTHER DEPARTURE, AND LETTERS FROM THE ABSENT.

STRANGE might it seem that the losing sight of all she loved to look upon, should have had this joyful effect on Maria Palliser; yet the precipitate flight which raises the wonder and excites the vexation of the whole house, is to her the most irrefragable proof of her conquest over Frere. His profound silence on the subject she believed to be equally engrossing them both, demanded no explanation with her. "He, thoroughly enlightened upon the nature of her feelings, must know that he had the right to address her in the language of a professed admirer; but with his characteristic generosity, and a delicacy of mind few men but himself would have displayed under similar temptation, he waived this privilege in deference to her scruples and reputation:" for in the sight of the world there could be no doubt that *he* would be held inexcusable in declaring himself, and *she* in listening favourably to him while her promise to another yet stood valid.

That Mr. Frere was hastening to unloose that hateful bond: that he was quitting Etheridge for no other earthly purpose, Maria at this season entertained not a shadow of doubt; and there was such

a full measure of felicity in the thought, that it bore her buoyant over every adverse reflection. "He goes for my sake!" she loved to repeat the words as the truest panacea for all her doubts and difficulties. "It is for *me* alone he undertakes this painful adventure!" Or, if this scarcely sufficed to drive away all pity and remorse, she had only to recall to her faithful memory the smile so expressive of hope and intelligence, the assured yet respectful salutation with which Frere had disappeared from her eyes; and the conscience, ever till now so difficult to deal with, lay, as it were, coiled up within her, torpid and insensible, just like a dormouse in its winter's sleep!

No sooner was Mr. Girdlestone made acquainted with the grand event of the morning, and so relieved effectually of his nervous dread of encountering the deaf guest on the road to his daughter's apartment, than he proceeded to visit her without any of the usual clandestine precautions; assuming from that moment the serene and gentlemanly air of one wholly unconscious of any but the public entrance: henceforth ignoring all acquaintance with back-stairs and scullery doors.

It was from her father's lips that Barbara now learned the flight of her old lover.

Engrossed with his own peculiar satisfaction at an event relieving him personally, and from many causes, from a world of trouble, Mr. Girdlestone had not paused sufficiently to calculate the effect it was likely to have upon his child.

"Gone!" she cried, starting from her pillow. "Gone!

You cannot mean that he has left me without a word of explanation? No letter—no message?"

The colour on her cheek deepened to a resentful glow. Was it for this she had thrown aside the seemly reserve of her sex, and pursued and solicited this obdurate man? For this, and *only* this, that he should spurn and avoid her as something hateful to his imagination?

The silence of the family—their evident reluctance to enter into the particulars of Frere's behaviour—though but the result in fact of some compunctious scruples, and an objection to telling more lies than the occasion actually demanded, struck their poor patient as confirmatory of her most mortifying surmises. What, indeed, trusting in them and their representations, could she suppose, if it were not that the love Manley Frere had once borne her was changed to a hatred so bitter that her advances were all repelled with disgust, and that the very air she breathed had become insupportable to him?

Throughout the whole of a transaction which had made her own unlucky name synonymous with that of the fair betrayer in the old ballad, the modern Barbara Allan had continued to esteem the man she slighted, and had ever accused herself as the weakest and most inconstant of women:—nevertheless, it is one thing to think evil of ourselves, and even to publish the sense we entertain of our own demerits, and quite another to have that mean and derogatory opinion impartially reciprocated by the friend whose consideration is dearest to us; and Barbara Girdlestone, loved and admired, extol-

led and flattered from her cradle, could ill brook such very rigid measure in the justice apportioned to her.

"See, see!" she cried impetuously, dispersing the tears of shame and anger, which were blinding her beautiful eyes. "Do you not see how he justifies me in every thing I have done? If this infirmity of his is such a direful thing that even the best natures grow morose and brutish under its influence, those who suffer from it ought to live alone. I, at least"—haughtily—"am no fit companion for such a froward disease." But here her wrath became softened by the very images she used to inflame it, and she turned the subject by addressing Mrs. Barclay.

"I put an unworthy task upon you, ma'm; but, believe me, when I asked what seemed so slight a favour, I never contemplated your meeting with such a churlish rebuff. I have a hundred pardons to beg, of you and all who have borne with me so patiently. It seems that, after all, you knew this—this—old friend of mine"—she tried to cover her mortification with a little convulsive laugh—"you knew him, you see, better than I did—far, far more justly! But all is over now, and the only way I have to shew my grateful sense of your goodness to me, is by relieving you, as quickly as may be, from my irksome company."

Miss Girdlestone then notified her fixed resolution of returning immediately, and at all risks, to Langton. In vain did her father and the Divets represent the impropriety of her travelling in her present state; and, as they were quite easy on the subject of Mr. Frere, they

were able to reproduce warmly and naturally those arguments against sudden exertions, which the fair invalid, in conjunction with her doctors, had but the day before set forth so learnedly. She would listen to none of them now, but insisted on being dressed and made ready for the journey. And although, in the course of her preparations, it became apparent to her entertainers that Miss Girdlestone was really more unfit to leave them than they had been hitherto disposed to allow, their hospitable remonstrances made no sort of impression on her.

Kind as were the faces around her, courteously as she was tended, the sight of them reminded her only of disappointment and humiliation; and even when half-fainting from bodily suffering and anguish of mind, this gentle yet absolute queen of beauty found strength to set them all at nought by her regal "*Je le veux.*"

In their hearts the Divets could not be otherwise than content to lose sight of one who had caused them such annoyance, and whose presence had proved such a serious obstacle in the way of their dearest projects. As promptly as might be, therefore, old Jesse's commodious carriage was ordered to the door, and all things made ready for her speedy departure.

As silent, then, and almost as wan as when she had been first brought thither, Miss Girdlestone was carried from the chamber where she had been beguiled with such hopes of happiness, and where they had all so quickly faded away.

The transient indignation—the sense of outraged modesty and wounded pride—which had inspired her

with strength to depart, were not stern enough to maintain their dominion over the softer feelings which would come thronging upon her; and in the mournful curiosity with which her looks wandered about the stairs and corridors, as they bore her along them, you might see she was busy seeking evidence of the recent presence of her cold and inexorable lover.

Most cautiously did the Colonel's mistress keep aloof, till certain that Miss Girdlestone had left the house. In the midst of her own tumultuous sensations, her unholy triumph and racking anxiety, Maria had many a misgiving when she thought of her conduct to poor Barbara.

She did not, even to herself, attempt to justify it; merely alleging the greatness of the temptation—the enormity of the stake for which she had been playing. But there was one in the house who, knowing and caring nothing for Miss Palliser's temptation, roundly characterized her proceedings as a very dirty transaction.

Cousin Sally having, up to a certain point, favoured the views of the Divets, and connived at their intriguing in Frere's affairs, could not, with any regard to consistency, abuse her relations quite so heartily as she longed to do; but no such scruples withheld her in the case of Maria, whom she beheld as a false ally, and she took the earliest opportunity of giving "Miss P," as she expressed it, "a bit of her mind"— advising her, whatever she did, to keep the matter from coming to the knowledge of Colonel Hussey; for she might take it on the authority of Sally Barclay's "own ipsey-dixsey, that if that good-natured, honest fellow got scent of the affair, and of all

her meddling and making with old Jesse Divet, (who ought to be ashamed of himself too,) it was ten to one that he would have no further connection with such a slippery, double-faced piece of prudery as his sweetheart had proved herself: and so my service to you, Miss Maria, and never write to *me* for a character, let you be ever so much in want of one!"

From the mortification of Mrs. Sarah's presence and animadversions, however, the Colonel's bethrothed was shortly exempt; the place becoming distasteful to the frank and single-minded old woman, when she could no longer feel cordially towards its inmates. At an early day, therefore, following the departure of Mr. Frere and his deluded mistress, cousin Sally took her leave also; not without a hint to George Barclay (now her sole confidant at Etheridge) of a matter to be seen to, and set to rights, when she should have got safe to London. By the expression with which he received her communications, it would seem that he did not lay much stress upon the value of cousin Sally's endeavours; but then Kezia's husband was notoriously of a desponding turn of mind.

Although Mrs. Sarah Barclay was not a person to be proud of as a blood-relation, or much to be paraded in society, yet most people felt that the manor-house had lost something of its animation, when the joke and the jollity of the rough old spinster no longer resounded through its walls. In the present conjuncture, especially, the mansion wanted all its accustomed advantages to rescue it from a charge of dulness, such as under the reign

of the Divets it had, probably, never been threatened with till then.

Whoever has experienced the sudden and total withdrawal of some object of interest and attraction more than ordinary—some person or pursuit demanding the sacrifice of time, talents, and attention, for the space of weeks and months together, upon which his strongest efforts, and most persevering endeavours have daily and hourly turned as the one grand pivot of existence—such an one may conceive the sort of blank which now spread its monotonous character through the whole extent of the Etheridge mansion; causing its spacious halls, and well-proportioned chambers, to seem empty and forlorn, and oppressing the very souls of the disappointed Divets. For though the family, ever careful of appearances, held it a matter of policy to mention Mr. Frere's return as a thing to be shortly expected, there was not one of them who really credited the probability of such an event; and, disposed as they were to make the best of unavoidable failures in their worldly projects, they found it very trying to preserve the contented features and unruffled composure, which constituted their sole chance of rebutting satisfactorily the malicious insinuations of the Etheridge gossips.

David, especially, who had less command of himself than any of the household, pished and pshawed, fidgeted, and fussed, till he got the memorable folding-screen removed from the daily sitting-room, and loudly censured his own folly in having sanctioned the putting in of that "ridiculous bow-window: a very useless alter-

ation, Mrs. George, whatever you and Miss Phebe may think about it; and so little in keeping with the architecture of the house, that it is quite enough of itself to draw upon us the remarks of this malicious neighbourhood: quite enough, ma'm—quite enough, young ladies!"

Now, there was this difference between the nature of the Divets' feelings and those of their only remaining guest, Miss Palliser, that the same time—the same quiet revolution of the planets which brought solace to the family, and enabled them to resume their old habits, and even to smile at the sly jokes and satirical condolences of their grandsire, had a much less favourable effect on Maria. Each day that rolled by without producing any explanation from Manley Frere, overshadowed her with fresh apprehension, and doubts that would not be dismissed; though still she strove hard to check their ill-omened gathering: for she who, along the course of her sad career, had, on all occasions, shown herself so firm and collected—so resolute to look danger in the face, and be beforehand with her preparations against possible misfortune—now that her affections were involved in the process of events, had grown to be the fearfullest of the fearful.

The day after Frere's departure brought Maria a letter from Colonel Hussey, written in his usual spirits; or, if there seemed any drawback to his self-satisfied condition, it arose only from a tender solicitude as to the state of his mistress's health; some slight failure in that being his only mode of accounting for the shortness and in-

frequency of her share in their correspondence. Maria had trusted to escape any more of the Colonel's letters written in this tone; but, "at all events," she reflected, "that, knowing the actual state of their affairs, it would not be required that she should answer it, or in any way plunge herself deeper in the mire of deceit." A very brief period must now suffice to enlighten him upon the real nature of her feelings. Mr. Frere, or Cranston, as impartial mediator, had probably been with him already, and she should be spared any more of these distressing letters. The severest language her lover could use, would seem less cutting and intolerable to her than his calm, contented references to the future, and the affecting reliance he constantly placed upon her truth and attachment.

In the ordinary course of their correspondence, the following morning would bring no letter from Colonel Hussey, as it was his custom to write only on the intermediate days; but now the omission of any despatch from Woolwich was interpreted to mean something extra-significant. He was supposed to be too deeply troubled to put pen to paper at the accustomed time—too indignant, or too miserable—which might it be?

But Etheridge was a place important enough to have a second delivery of letters; still, therefore, the sun might not go down on this state of trying suspense; and when the afternoon post was in, with still no letter from her ill-used lover, Maria fancied him coming in person to demand the story of his wrongs from her own false lips. And then, again, imagination would cheat her with the

happier surmise, that instead of her poor, cast-off lover, with wrath and anguish in every feature, it might be the Colonel's successor who would present himself before her on the morrow, eager to pour out his long-suppressed feelings, and obtain from her a verbal confirmation of all he had learned by stealth.

Is it really the case that the post always happens to be later of delivery on those days when we are most interested in its communications, or is it solely our mortal egotism that inclines us so to think?

Miss Palliser, after a night of scanty repose, arose betimes, bent on securing any letters that might be intended for her, at the earliest opportunity, and without witnesses. But it was an useless precaution; for, on that morning, the family were settled at their breakfast before the postman's knock was heard.

Maria's changing colour and absent manner alone told the story of her secret uneasiness, while the Divets, without a tithe of her anxiety, were severe in their reprobation of the postal arrangements; and David even threatened to write to the Postmaster-General as soon as he had finished his breakfast. Still, it would appear that he was more moved by a patriotic sense of inconvenience to the public at large, than by any private motive of his own; as he thanked his stars, with the self-satisfaction of one long relieved from professional correspondence, that he had no particular interest in the matter. Individually, it signified "not a straw to him whether his letters came to hand half an hour sooner or later." And, touching on that subject, Mr. Divet continued—

"I don't know how it may seem to you, young ladies, but it strikes me and my old-fashioned notions, that it would be no more than ordinary civility if a certain deaf friend of ours was to put himself to the trouble of sending us a line or two, just to say how he is getting on, and what he means to do with himself. And even supposing the son of *his* father was to condescend to return a few civil thanks to the son of *mine*, for all the attention which has been shewn him for upwards of so many weeks in this poor house of ours, I should not think, I say, that such an exertion was altogether superfluous and out of season. Such, at least, is the opinion of David Divet, Esq., of Etheridge House, in the county of Surrey, formerly subscribing himself gentleman and attorney-at-law."

"Oh, that is quite enough, father!" said Phebe, interrupting him. "Stick to the respectable present, and let the industrious past take care of itself."

"No, no, Miss Phebe!" David retorted, still harbouring a touch of the savage in his glee. "Remember I only bargained to drop the law in consideration of being received as guest and father-in-law at a certain estate in Yorkshire. Give me a polite invitation to bed and board at Old Court, signed Phebe Frere, and you'll find me your very obedient servant, ready to sink the attorney, and resume the country gentleman of easy fortune, and manners conforming thereto."

Considering Miss Divet's recent, and, as it was believed to be, signal defeat, she may well be excused for shewing some impatience at this injudicious speech,

followed up as it was by one of George Barclay's most pointed sneers. But the attention of all was opportunely diverted just then by the entrance of Dawkins with a salver full of letters—one of which (and only one) fell to the lot of Maria Palliser.

"Better late than never!" was the remark of David, laying hands on the rest, before Dawkins had time to deliver them formally to their proper owners. It was a proceeding which never failed to anger that respectable domestic, and he retired with evident emotion. "Better late than never!" Divet repeated. "Here's Manley Frere's letter of thanks that I have just been holding forth about: I should know that scrawl of his amongst a thousand. And now that the important matter *is* come to hand"—jerking it carelessly on the table—"it may wait till I have overlooked the rest of my correspondence."

"No, it may not though," said Phebe, "for it is addressed to me; I can see the Miss as plain as possible," and, starting forward, she seized the letter. Her father, half in joke and half in earnest, reached over the table to prevent her; a cream-jug was overturned, a tea-cup barely rescued from destruction, and, in the midst of the confusion, Phebe tore open the letter.

"What is it, Phebe? What can it be?" cried her sister, intensely anxious.

"In the name of Heaven, child, what nonsense are you after?" was the exclamation of her father, always the last in the house to catch an idea, but now growing purple as the truth dawned upon him.

A softer, but scarcely less vivid, tinge was seen to flood the cheeks of his daughter; her eyes distended as, with the glance of a hawk, she gathered the sense of the writing, and in another moment, clasping her hands and the welcome letter in them, she burst into a cry of joy and exultation. "I have got him! I've got him! I have got him after all—I have—*indeed*, I have! Oh, Kezia!"—and the sisters flew into each other's arms; while David, utterly overpowered by the unlooked-for news, dropped into his chair, murmuring, in a subdued tone, "Lord have mercy on us!"

The sisterly embrace was but the affair of a moment, Mrs. George instantly applying to business—"But the letter—the letter, Phebe! Let's see what he says!"

"Yes, yes—the dear, delightful scrawl! Here, here—look with your own eyes! something about—where is it?—something about his hand and his heart. Oh, here it is!—his hand and his heart, forsooth! ha, ha, ha!—poor benighted creature! and his ears into the bargain, I suppose."

"Hush, you ungrateful little thing!" said her sister, laughing, as she caught the letter from her; and David, collecting himself, found breath to press for further particulars. "No, but is it really? Are you quite sure, Phebe—eh, Kezia, my dear? Is the thing done *bona fide*—down in black and white? Ho, ho! my girls, no fear of a breach of promise in that case."

"You horrid, vulgar old man! to talk of such a thing at such a tender moment. But, come, let us all go to grandpapa—dear old granny! How he'll stare when I show him what I've got!"

"Upon my life he will! And it will just put an end to his quizzing Phebe. No more reflections on your bad success, my girl—ha, ha, Victoria! Hurra for Old Court and the family jewels!"

And the respectable trio rushed out of the room, their mirth resounding as they crossed the hall to the Patriarch's chamber.

George Barclay, who had hitherto been affecting perfect indifference to the news, now threw down his knife and fork with an air of indignant vexation. "It's all up with poor Frere!" said he. "What a rage cousin Sally will be in! I should like to be at the old lady's elbow when she hears of it."

He raised his eyes from the table as he spoke, and was struck with the countenance of Miss Palliser: there was an expression in it so little like any thing he had ever known it assume till then—such a strange mixture of fear and incredulity: her voice, too, sounded unlike itself. "They are in error," she whispered hoarsely—"all of them—they must be: there is delusion somewhere."

Mr. Barclay regarded her rather attentively, and then replied, "Yes, there *is* a mistake, no doubt, and a very great one; but it lies with the poor, helpless fellow, who has tumbled into the trap our people laid for him so artfully. What are the words of that Psalm? I thought of Manley Frere when I heard it read the other Sunday, 'Surely the net is laid in vain in the sight of any bird,'—not if he happens to be deaf, I shall say to myself for the future. But are you quite the thing this morning,

Maria? It strikes me these domestic hurricanes, which are all very agreeable to the parties concerned, are rather too much for your quiet nature. I am sure I should wonder if they were not."

She could not answer him for a moment; but then, exerting her habitual self-command, acknowledged that her head was a little confused. She would "go to her own room," she said; but, ere reaching the door, her purpose faltered, and, turning back, she asked George with an icy smile, "If he would mind humouring her so far as to ascertain exactly what had happened?"

"I did not give you credit for so much curiosity," he carelessly replied; "but even *your* equanimity is not to remain proof against an affair of love and wedlock." He did not, however, refuse to gratify her request, but went off to gather full particulars.

Maria watched him out of the room, and then sat immovable, with her eyes closed and her hands convulsively grasping the arms of her chair. Once only her posture changed, for suddenly she remembered the Colonel's letter, which had fallen to the floor unnoticed till then: that offered a quicker clue to what was so mysterious—a more instant confirmation or denial of the hideous news. In trembling eagerness she now sought for and tore it open.

Alas! the well-known commencement—the kind words, "My best and ever dearest Maria," was explanation enough, and seemed to sear the eyeballs of the wretched reader; for she cowered down, covering her face, and it was only after some moments of shuddering horror that she could force herself to read on.

But then, every faintest hope which her wild affection urged her to cling to, all gave way at once. Strange and inexplicable it still was; for her agitation was yet too bewildering to suffer any clear understanding either of the steps by which she had deceived herself, or the disappointment which was overwhelming her; but there was no striving against the sure conviction, upon which every loving word of poor Colonel Hussey was setting its gentle seal.

Not a trace of anger—not a whisper of reproach—appeared in any portion of the letter. Even those brief, unsatisfactory notes of hers, at the style of which lovers less contented with their choice, and less trustful in their character, might justly have taken some small umbrage, seemed to vex the kind-hearted man upon her account alone—proving she was not well enough, or in spirits, to write to him as formerly. Seeing that the task was irksome—though he little dreamed how painful it really was—he entreated her that she would not, out of any false though amiable idea of giving him pleasure, constrain herself to fulfil the supposed duty.

"I am certainly uneasy," he said, "if I do not hear from you at all; but an envelope, with only your dear name inscribed, or the two words 'All's well,' in the hand I love to see, this will suffice me to live on for the short time we are to be asunder—or till I can find or make opportunity to steal over to Etheridge. Just at present, however, with all my endeavours, I cannot contrive this; and, if any thing could make me regret having put myself a little more forward in the way of my profession

than some of my worthy contemporaries think necessary, it would be that I am now tied by the leg, as I may call it, and in a manner pledged to carry through what I have begun; or, at least, have been instrumental in urging others to undertake. I allude to those experiments in gunnery which I mentioned in my last, and which require, I assure you, my dear girl, no trifling calculation and mental labour to bring them to perfection—notwithstanding the want of science with which a fair lady once reproached me. My sweet Maria may see by this allusion how I treasure up old causes of complaint, against the time when, finding ourselves *too* happy, and every thing too much *couleur de rose*, we shall seek occasion in the past for a little conjugal sparring."

Thus far we have gone with the poor deceived Colonel through his easy-flowing and contented lucubrations; but one may well conceive how little of it was actually taken in or comprehended by his wretched correspondent, while her eyes glanced wildly over the writing, and her heart sickened as if she had been a criminal, constrained by some refinement of cruelty to read the sentence of her condemnation.

As George Barclay crossed the hall, a ringing laugh was wafted to his ear, even from old Divet's innermost chamber, plainly descriptive of the overflowing jollity of the party there assembled. It was, indeed, a joyous—a triumphant little group! Their pleasure only the greater for the bitter ashes and the scorching coals of disappointment and tribulation out of which it was springing—phœnix-like; and the decent decorum which

might have been maintained, had the proprietor of Old Court made proposals in form when he was personally besieged, and a surrender of the garrison daily expected, was, under the present sudden turn of events, not so much as aimed at by a single individual of the lot.

A veritable inhaling of the laughing-gas, instead of the matter-of-fact tea they had left half-finished in their cups, could hardly have inspired them with wilder glee, or have destroyed more utterly their powers of self-possession. There was a mixed hubbub of singing, laughing, even to the limits of shrieking—of coughing and stamping of feet; and, when Barclay opened the door of the Patriarch's dressing-room, he found the messengers of joy executing a *pas de trois* round the snug little table at which old Jesse was sitting at breakfast: the fulness and exquisite relish of their gaiety finding no vent so natural and irresistible as this manifestation of delight—after the fashion of the great Mr. Bumble, when, on an occasion not altogether dissimilar, he gave way to a saltatory inclination. George's entrance dispersed them reeling with laughter, and too breathless to speak coherently; but if the least doubt could remain in his mind as to Manley Frere's serious meaning and matrimonial intentions, there was confirmation of it in every line and pucker of the Patriarch's face: in the quiver of his chin, and the gleam of his quiet grey eyes, as he sat in his easy-chair shrouded in a long white dressing-gown and cap—so dry, so shrivelled, and divested of every living tint—and yet, for all that, so marvellously full of life and vivacity.

Phebe, the youngest and most nimble of the dancers, was naturally the first to recover from the effects of her exercise, and in her coaxing yet boastful manner she accosted the old gentleman:—

"Now, never venture to laugh at me again, or even so much as hint that I am not the cleverest of your children. Do you hear, you old granny? and do you see this?" and, with the gesture of a laughter-loving Bacchanal sporting with old Silenus, she held Frere's letter over the old man's head, occasionally tickling his nose with the sharp corners thereof. "Fancy what a charming, what an irresistible, girl I must be! How good, and wise, and well-behaved, to have made captive the fastidious Mr. Frere—that pink of propriety and stupid decorum! Oh, it's worth any thing to have caught him when he held out so long!"

"Ah! but I must handle the precious document, my pet, and be certain of its contents before I make my obeisance and take off my nightcap to the future mistress of Old Court. So, give me my glasses, Phebe—bring them hither, quick! Ha, ha! my children," he continued, as he fitted his spectacles on, and peered over their rims at his triumphant family—"is it not a blessed privilege for an old fellow of ninety and odd, with the grave gaping wide for the old man—ha, ha!—is it not, I say, a fine thing to be able to renew his youth with such trifles and toys as these? A love-letter, truly! an amatory epistle! Why, the mere touch of it—eh, my dears?—ought to act like electricity, and stir the life-blood to the very tips of his fingers. And when he

reads about hearts and darts, and all the tender matters which I presume our deaf friend is not too wise to indite to his little shepherdess, you will find, I dare say, that they will give your grandfather a new voice and a clear strong utterance, like a new set of teeth fresh from the dentist!"

Holding forth in this bantering yet half-sarcastic tone, old Jesse began the letter; and yet he had not gone far when he fell into a tone more consistent with the matter contained in it.

In spite of the many and grievous failings of the aged man, and so much that was worldly in his nature, there was still vouchsafed to him the power of discerning and estimating those nobler principles of action which, in his long career, he had too often set aside; and now he was evidently touched by the graceful yet unstudied language in which Mr. Frere expressed himself: his sensitiveness, carried to an almost morbid excess, with regard to the personal defect which rendered him, as he thought, unmeet for the companionship of the young and gay; and, on the other hand, his firm reliance on the unselfish and untiring nature of woman's love—such an attachment (as if he could indeed flatter himself he was capable of inspiring in the heart of Miss Divet) might enable her to be happy with him, in spite of his disadvantages.

"For himself," the letter went on to say, "the conviction of being the object of such a sentiment in a creature so amiable as his sweet little playmate, would change the whole character of his life—the whole tenor of his thoughts and purposes—casting such a light upon his

path as had not cheered it for many a day. But upon this point he would forbear to press, lest it should seem as if he aimed only at exciting her sympathy with his misfortunes. Much as he valued—and none could do so more than he—the tender compassion with which she regarded him, he should be reluctant to believe that pity alone had persuaded her to become his friend and life companion. Some sacrifice would be demanded of any woman consenting to be his wife; but not even to win Phebe to be all his own, would he have it greater than might be borne with a cheerful and acquiescent spirit."

It seemed as if what old Jesse had said in joke concerning the rejuvenising power residing in love-letters, had really some foundation in fact; so little did the infirmities consequent upon his many years, detract from the excellence of the old man's reading: with nicer emphasis, or more apparently proper feeling, the sentiments of the writer could not have been delivered.

It is held as a current maxim, that whoever can perceive the beauties of a painting, or test with judgment the merits of an opera or a poem, must possess some particle of the spirit which has urged the artist, poet, or musician, to fulfil his high vocation with all the powers wherewith he is endowed. Now it would appear as if the same saying should hold good when we apply it to the heart and moral qualities of man; but is there really any thing akin in the moral nature of Manley Frere and the wily intriguing old lawyer, Jesse Divet?

Whatever might be her grandsire's just estimation of

literary style or human character, Phebe confessed to none of it. The rest of his auditors, each in their own way, display some mark of feeling: David grows less boisterous in his glee, and, ceasing to rub his hands so incessantly, deposits them behind him, under his coat; and Kezia, while her grandfather proceeds, has even a real *bona fide* tear in her eye, and she murmurs, "Poor, dear Mr. Manley," whispering gently enough not to disturb the reading, "what an excellent, charming person he is!" while her husband knits his lowering brows, and gives her such a glance as now and then passes between married folk, and is useful perhaps as preventing any more dangerous demonstration.

But Phebe, true to the character in which she has hitherto appeared before the public (for she never *has* pretended any regard for Frere), hangs over the chair of the reader, with an expression in which many of the worst points of the child and the woman are developed. The words which fall with a sort of reverence from her grandfather's lips, she echoes in the voice of the scorner: the letter is precious to her no doubt, but only in a worldly sense, as ministering to her views of advancement. No, she loves not the writer, though he is offering her all that man can give to woman, and that in terms that melt all hearts but hers: she wearies of his eloquence, and makes a mockery of his inestimable gifts. There was a vindictive mood about the shepherdess strangely at variance with her youthful aspect; and, though she had every reason to suppose that Frere was bending at last before the power of her attractions, and she was ready enough

to vaunt of the conquest she had gained, Phebe, nevertheless, could not forgive him for having so long resisted her power; and even now, when he was certainly doing all he could to gratify her, those signs of a careless indifference which had occasionally marked the manners of the deaf guest during her eager pursuit of him, rankled fresh in her memory, and the spite she could not wreak on himself was betrayed by her petulant remarks upon the terms of his proposal, and her unsparing ridicule of those who were listening to it respectfully. As usual, there was some smartness in her attack on both parties; and, though the others joined at first in checking the friskiness of their pet lamb, they soon caught the infection of Phebe's low-minded pleasantry, and the laugh became general.

Disgusted at a scene which he had feeling enough to condemn as it deserved, George Barclay turned away and left them in the height of their diversion.

As he quitted old Divet's quarters, he saw Miss Palliser slowly advancing across the hall; and, supposing she awaited the intelligence he had been sent to acquire, he met her with a compassionate shrug, and the assurance that "it was all up, sure enough, with poor Frere." "That little viper has him fast, and I wish him joy of his bargain, poor fellow!"

But Maria, though pausing as he approached her, still looked upon him with a countenance so pale and bewildered, that, after repeating the substance of what was passing in old Divet's chamber, Barclay again noticed her evident indisposition, and offered to send a servant

to her, or assist her himself to her room. Even in the midst of her trouble, however, Maria was aware of something suspicious in his glance, and so declined his help; though less by speech than gesture. "In a little while all would be well with her," she murmured in the same hoarse whisper that had already sounded so strangely in his ear; and, as long as she felt his attention to be directed towards her, she succeeded by means of that stern will—which was to Maria Palliser, in the place of more efficient help, her only resource in the hour of danger or distress—in maintaining her upright bearing and equality of step; but, when certain that no human eye was upon her, then she took advantage of every support that presented itself on her way, and sometimes paused altogether, as if a weight hung round her so heavy and hard to be borne that even her stubborn resolution trembled and wavered beneath it.

In this way she reached the gallery which contained her own sleeping-room; closing the door of communication with a quiet and, as it were, a cautious touch. Struggling with thoughts that goaded her to the verge of madness, she sought what she supposed to be the profound solitude of her chamber; but happily (perhaps) for her, it was just then no sanctuary for grief or despair. The housemaids had not yet completed their morning's work there, and their voices, as they talked and tittered together, issued from the open door and arrested her progress.

It would seem to have been easy enough to banish the intruders and take their place: a word—a sign

even—would have done it; but the simple alternative failed to strike Maria: either her tongue did literally cleave to the roof of her mouth, or at the very instant she found courage to achieve some fearful thing, the power was wanting to prepare all the requisite steps with calmness and self-possession.

A louder, heartier laugh from the girls, as they went about their light labours, scared her effectually away. She fled to the nearest point where she could be safe from human ear or eye; and He who reads the hearts of his creatures, alone can tell the horrors which this apparently trivial interruption had averted.

It would be an unprofitable task, even if it were within the limits of human expression, to expose in all their intensity the agonies of a mind so strong, yet undisciplined, as was that of the unfortunate Maria Palliser. Long was it before she could convince herself that Manley Frere had never distinguished her with any thing more than the most indifferent regard. She had latterly so persuaded herself of his affection, that it was hard indeed to receive any other impression of his conduct and views; and, though the reality of her own overthrow was not to be doubted, its conviction was accompanied by a feeling of astonishment that kept her dizzy and bewildered: but her comprehension, confused only for awhile, returned with a cruel clearness; and so she lost even the poor satisfaction which a woman finds in accusing the man by whom she has been deceived, and calling herself his victim. "*His* victim! had he not rather been sacrificed by her?"

By slow degrees, then, and brooding incessantly on the circumstances which had seemed to her prepossessed judgment to place herself as the prominent point of interest to the deaf guest, Maria grew at last to discern the ungrateful truth, that she—who had all along appropriated his hints and half-veiled allusions, his improved spirits and sudden change of purpose, fancying in her blindness that they could refer only to herself—had been wholly a secondary object with him, uncared for, and disregarded but as a common acquaintance, while his real attention was fixed the whole time on Phebe Divet. Her memory, ever exact and retentive, gave her back every word and look of his, on occasions when his manner had struck her as most significant of all she most wished him to be feeling; and, in the altered light in which every thing now appeared, so much was opened to her awakened perception, that she wondered how she could have been so led astray: surprise and self-reproach going ever hand in hand, as she looked back on the facility with which she had given herself up to be deluded and hoodwinked by that subtlest of fiends, who makes the vanity of his victims the surest instrument of their destruction.

As to the origin of the deplorable misapprehension into which they both had fallen, for that there remained but one interpretation. The ill-fated letter which had caused her ruin, and perhaps his also—for what but ruin could arise to Manley Frere from a union with Divet's daughter?—that wretched letter, which had wrought such unimaginable woe and disgrace, must have been so

torn and defaced by the time it fell into his hands, and so divested of any distinct reference to herself, as to impress him with the idea of its being addressed to Phebe; and every thing in the exhortations and reproofs of Lucy Ainsworth which could be held as flattering to his self-esteem, and calculated to excite his gratitude and inspire his fondness for the receiver of such an epistle, he had attributed to the basest and most unworthy of the Divet family.

Up to that period, how little of peculiar interest had he taken in this artful girl—how uniformly indifferent in his conduct towards her—scarcely, indeed, treating her with the respect he showed to other women: but the influence of such a disclosure, the conscious pride of being the subject of a passion as fervent as it was secret —No, Maria had *not* over-estimated the overpowering effect of such a circumstance: what man, young, spirited, and imaginative, could resist its fascination?

And yet, in exculpating Frere, with what loathing did Maria look back upon her own conduct during the late transactions at Etheridge! How she had abused herself, and sacrificed her boasted sincerity, by working and plotting not only *with* the Divets, but *for* them as it now appeared—horrible indeed was the retribution, and, if just, how great must her crime have been! She had been unable to brook the idea of having Barbara Girdlestone reinstated in the heart and good opinion of her old lover; but this would have been light compared to the misery—the incomparable misery—of beholding him lavishing his love and confidence upon a woman

unworthy of him in every point of view; who almost, as Maria believed, held him in aversion, and was, at all events, capable of deriding him to his very face. A time must come when he would discover how he had been practised upon, and the baseness of this girl and all her tribe be made manifest. Then what pain and humiliation would his noble nature have to endure! What a life-long repentance! And all through her! Oh, for some stroke of fate to annihilate the wretched cause of his disgrace, blotting out the very name of so fallen a creature, while it should save him unblemished in happiness and honour!

Without seeking to invest the erring and unfortunate Maria Palliser with virtues incompatible with her real character, we cannot but admire the purity and unselfishness of her attachment to Frere. It was a sentiment which might have put to shame that of many a more amiable and right-minded person; having, in truth, so little in common with the frivolous, coarse, and earthborn passion which ordinarily goes by the sacred name of love. Even in the abyss of her own despair, without one earthly hope to cheer—one ray of heavenly light to guide or support her—still *his* welfare was her first concern; and she sorrowed less for her own disappointment than for the degradation she foresaw impending over *him*. And thus her devotion to an earthly object—noble, because that object was worthy the regard of a high-minded woman, and generous because it expected no return—stood Maria, in this instance, in the place of any higher principle of duty,

and enabled her to wrestle effectually with the demon of darkness and despair, which ever stood beckoning to her on the threshold of her chamber. Here also, as in the case of Richard Cranston and all who bear the burden of mortal sin, Maria may find some less exalted motive to sustain and urge her to exertion; yet it is certain that no stain of selfishness dimmed the purity of the original impulse.

The outward composure which followed upon the first agony of her grief, was not the stagnant calm of hopeless and aimless endurance, but the concentration of her whole mind to discover some possible mode of extricating him, whom she honoured above all the children of men, from the false position to which her weakness had originally betrayed him. It was meet, she thought, that she who had wrought the mischief should seek the remedy; and if the remotest hope remained of undoing what she had done, it behoved her to make the attempt at whatever cost to her private feelings: ay, even though it should entail upon her such a course of proceeding as her whole nature revolted from. It may be well imagined, however, that Maria did not all at once attain this point of self-abandonment.

From natural aversion to compromising herself, she meditated writing anonymously to expose the worthlessness and intriguing character of the family with whom Mr. Frere was proposing to connect himself; but further reflection convinced her that, on a point involving such serious considerations, he would naturally require something beyond the word of a nameless

traducer: she must affix her true signature to whatever she wrote before it could command any credit—nay, her reason told her she must go even further than this if she desired to influence him effectually. Maria's recent experience in a passion she was wont once to depreciate and ridicule, convinced her that, as long as Frere was possessed with the persuasion of the little Divet's affection for him, no censure that she might cast on that young person would suffice to shake his faith in her good qualities, or weaken the influence she had acquired over his feelings. While fancying the little creature devoted to him heart and soul—as Maria knew he had reason to do—vain would it be for the most impartial and clear-sighted of witnesses to set forth her real character before his eyes, or dilate on the backslidings of any of her tribe. In short, to make the disclosure of use to him, he must be fully disenchanted from the bewitching idea of Phebe's being identical with the correspondent of Lucy Ainsworth. This error dissolved, and with it the romantic illusions involved in it, and the base designs of the Divets, their trickery and intriguing might be made easy enough of belief.

But then to effect this perfect enlightenment, and dispel every shadow of doubt, she herself—who alone of all living creatures possessed the key to his conduct, and a knowledge of the false conclusions which governed it—she, the humble heart-broken Maria, must offer herself a voluntary sacrifice, and divulge a secret touching herself, which she would have given worlds to bury in eternal silence. Throwing off all womanly reserve she must

declare that it was not Phebe Divet but she herself who had confessed to Lucy Ainsworth her love for the deaf guest; and whose irregular mind and unruly passions her rigid correspondent had thought it needful to counsel and control. Well might Maria's resolution falter as she contemplated a step so abhorrent to her pride and delicacy! Was there indeed no way but this to save him? Must *she* be shamed for ever before *he* could be rescued from the consequences of her folly?

The strife between feminine modesty and disinterested love was long and painful; and it still remains a question which principle would have prevailed, had no alternative been found—no middle course between the torture of disclosing the truth to Frere himself, or of leaving him to gather in ignorance the bitter fruits of her delusion. But just as she was at the height of her perplexity, the thought occurred to Maria of consulting Mr. Cranston upon the danger which menaced his friend, and—supposing no other resource remained—of even constituting him the depository of her wretched secret.

The young rector's attachment to Manley Frere, joined to his intelligence and solidity of character, pointed him out as the fittest person in the world to advise with, in a matter requiring judgment as well as zeal: and mortifying as it must be, under any circumstances, to have to whisper her folly and its consequences into the ear of a stranger, yet even this seemed to Maria many degrees more tolerable, more possible to be accomplished, than to write out her miserable confession, word by word, and send it straight and without

the slightest preparation to him who was the hero of the story.

As a Christian priest, Mr. Cranston ought to make allowances for human frailty; as a gentleman, he must be outwardly courteous. She asked, she expected no more than that; for well Maria apprehended the impressions of such a man in listening to her avowal; and, as the loved and appreciated friend of Manley Frere, his confidant, too, in much of this delicate dilemma—he must, she thought, be endowed with a sufficient portion of the old chivalric spirit, to respect the feelings of a woman, plunged—no matter by what means—in circumstances of such unexampled humiliation.

She would approach him, then, in the same manner—with exactly the same confidence and self-abandonment—with which a Roman Catholic draws near to her confessor, and try to sink the remembrance of his sex in that of his sacred calling: that holy office he had solemnly taken upon him, of consoling the afflicted, and succouring the weak. Surely, if he were animated by the smallest spark of genuine charity, he would frankly advance to receive her communication—would meet her half-way, and comprehend all her difficulties; and the confusion—the agony of confusion—which she foresaw must overwhelm her in speaking to him on such a subject.

Having convinced herself that this was the only course to be pursued, nothing remained but to consider the best means of entering upon it.

From the information of Druce, who had occasion to write to Etheridge about this time, it was known at the

mansion, that while Frere had proceeded almost immediately to Yorkshire, Mr. Cranston still lingered at his friend's town-house, having business to transact which would detain him in London till the ensuing Saturday. The very day following that intelligence, therefore, a letter was dropped into the little slit in the window of the Etheridge post-office by Miss Palliser's own fair hand: that hand which, it was currently reported and universally believed, would so shortly be placed, "for good and all," in the firm though tender grasp of Colonel Hussey of the Royal Artillery.

The note was so concise that we may copy it verbatim without the fear of being tedious. It was addressed to the "Rev Richard Cranston, Manley Frere's, Esq., Park Lane, London," and contained these lines:—

"Miss Palliser, understanding that it is Mr. Cranston's purpose to remain in town the rest of the week, earnestly requests that he will make it convenient to be at home on Friday next, between the hours of three and five, as she wishes to have some conversation with him on matters of the utmost importance to his friend, Mr. Frere. Miss Palliser trusts to Mr. Cranston's honour to keep this appointment strictly secret."

A postscript was added, requesting an answer by return of post; but the writer did not wait for a reply before she proceeded to make arrangements for leaving Etheridge.

We are aware that, for some time past, Maria had given up all idea of fulfilling her engagement with Colonel Hussey, and had only submitted to bear the cha-

racter of his bride-elect, from the wild, though sanguine persuasion, cherished and clung to with the blindest pertinacity to the very latest moment, that another was silently stepping forward to perform for her the ungrateful task of undeceiving and dismissing her old lover; thus saving her from the pain of actually, by word as well as deed, breaking her plighted troth.

Added to her other trials, was the necessity which now presented itself for immediately originating this dreaded explanation; for each day that Colonel Hussey was allowed to continue depending on her fair truth and kind intentions, would have the effect of embittering his eventual and inevitable disappointment—a cruel and most unnecessary aggravation of the mortal injury she meditated inflicting on him. Maria waited, therefore, only till she should find herself settled under some other roof than that of the Colonel's relations, before declaring to him her change of purpose. In case of publishing her intentions (inexplicable as they must appear), she could not have expected from the Divets either sympathy or assistance in her perplexities; and a longer domestication with this family became more irksome to her than ever, while conscious that she was summoning her best energies to counteract and overthrow the dearest design of their hearts.

Whatever might be the sins of the Divets, they had none to expiate towards herself. Uniform kindness, and a measure of liberality rare enough in these days of expensive selfishness, had marked their conduct to her ever since she came amongst them; and, but for

their simple reliance on her good feeling towards them, where would have been the opportunity now afforded her for abusing their confidence? Had they jealously excluded her from their family councils as a stranger, and a possible spy and informer, she might have suspected much that was amiss, but could hardly have been sufficiently cognizant of their schemes to have betrayed them effectually.

Maria had often asserted that our moral obligations were things so easily defined, that no creature endowed with reason, and earnestly seeking the right path to tread, need stray very widely for the want of light to guide him. But now, in setting herself to perform what she esteemed an act of duty, plain and undeniable, she saw herself getting involved in an evil labyrinth of treachery and ingratitude, from whence there could be no honourable escape. Had any hand but her own dug the pit on whose brink the Divets were so gaily dancing, she would have surveyed their sports and pastimes with her usual disdain; but, being herself the excavator, a sense of personal degradation intervened to lower this lofty superciliousness, for her conscience whispered her that she had once been the willing accomplice of those very persons whom she was now plotting to betray.

It would have accorded best with Maria's disposition and peculiar state of mind, to have betaken herself to some quiet lodging in London; where, having executed the mission which summoned her there, she might have enjoyed the consolation which solitude alone can afford

to an impassioned but reserved mind, struggling always, and at times half maddened, with the pangs of remorse and disappointed affection. But it was desirable, under her present difficulties, to avert the surprise and curiosity which a measure so apparently unaccountable would certainly attract. As the next available alternative, therefore, she wrote to claim the hospitality of an old friend of her mother's, one of the very few surviving connections of her family, who had pressed her with some warmth to visit her before her marriage.

Maria had hitherto declined the proposal, fearing that, in the mean time, Mrs. Otway might have made some arrangement which would interfere with her own; but she soon received a kind message, to the effect that the old lady would be delighted to see the daughter of her dear departed Jane, and converse with her upon old times. Nor, in the height of her complaisance, did Mrs. Otway omit sending her compliments to Colonel Hussey, "though unknown except by reputation;" requesting Maria to forward him the assurance, "that she (Mrs. Otway) was waiting with impatience the pleasure of being introduced to him; and hoped he would run over from Woolwich and give her his company to dinner in Chandos Street, the day of Miss Palliser's arrival."

These allusions to an apparently certain and prosperous state of things, must necessarily be matters of constant recurrence to the Colonel's mistress; yet no measure of use or familiarity could divest them of their secret sting.

At the manor-house, Miss Palliser's temporary removal

was anticipated as contributing greatly to the general satisfaction. Her presence, instead of the encouragement it might have been supposed to confer, acted rather as a restraint on the preparations for her approaching nuptials, or at least upon the discussions touching that important subject; consultations which the family themselves enjoyed extremely; even the Patriarch proffering his honoured advice, in settling questions of precedency, and giving his opinion relative to the embellishments which were projecting for the entertainment after the ceremony. But the chief figure in the pageant—the bride herself—was perceived to have a less genial relish for it than any of the household; and, whenever Maria came amongst them, a cold shadow, grey and creeping, seemed visibly to cross the wedding rippery, which all but she were so intent on accumulating and disposing to the best advantage.

In quitting the Etheridge mansion, Maria *had* hoped to be taking an eternal leave of every inmate it contained; but there was no escaping the escort of George Barclay, who was required to anticipate a visit with which he was shortly proposing to favour cousin Sally, in order that he might accompany his cousin-elect, and see her safely to her journey's end. And when she would have cut short their well-meant attentions, by alleging the brief duration of her visit to London, Maria felt that her lips were turning white at the falsehood they were trying to utter; conscious, as she was, that a voluntary return to that house was the last thing she could ever contemplate.

After a very slight opposition, therefore, she passively acquiesced in the arrangement.

Then at the moment of departure, when she would gladly have slipped away with as little notice as possible, there was old Jesse ready with his blessing, and David hurrying his servants, and calling about him with the cheerful fussiness which characterized him; and he and his eldest daughter put themselves to some inconvenience that they might both of them attend Miss Palliser to the station.

Maria flattered herself with having seen the last of Phebe, who had tripped off to gather a nosegay for the traveller, forgotten till the carriage was at the door; and David officiously urging despatch, she trusted this friendly attention might be the means of detaining the little Divet, and so save her from the sin of the parting kiss; but Phebe, well knowing the paternal tendency to over-punctuality, promised that the flowers should still be ready in time: "there was a quarter of an hour at least to spare."

And, true to her word, the railway-bell had not done ringing when the shepherdess made her appearance, having trotted after them in her own little pony-chaise; and now she ran along the platform, full of glee at winning her race and triumphing over her fidgety father, and, with a sweet and joyous expression, held up a nosegay of the most beautiful greenhouse plants, in token of her victory.

"Such a battle!" she cried, "such a tremendous bat-

tle as I have had with that stingy Robins, before I could get him to cut one of them!"

"You little marplot!" Kezia replied, "don't you see he is wanting to keep all his best flowers for bouquets on a certain occasion near at hand?"

"Ha, ha!" said Divet, "sly dog, sly dog, that gardener of ours! By the by, Maria, you must not forget to tell the Colonel."

"Oh, we have sent all sorts of messages already. Do stand back, my dear father, the train is in motion. Good bye Maria, God bless you till we see you again! Love to *you know who*, and bid him come down if he can, for a day or two, before *you know when*."

The inexorable train passed on, and the friendly faces were seen no more; but it struck George Barclay, as he sat opposite to Colonel Hussey's promised bride, that, even through the folds of her veil, he could trace something of that phenomenon which he had heard his little sister-in-law remark upon in high disapprobation: and certainly it did seem to be an odd peculiarity in Miss Palliser's constitution, that caused her so often to turn white and cadaverous, just on occasions when other young ladies, under the like circumstances, would be sporting their brightest and deepest blushes.

A true and loyal friend might, at this season, have proved a blessing invaluable to the wretched Maria; but then it must have been one who, to the charm of a warm and affectionate sympathy, should have added some powers of mind, wherewith to

have combated the wild and perilous course of thinking which was asserting its baleful dominion over her with each successive day.

To deal effectually with a disposition such as hers, requires a union of tenderness and discretion rarely to be met with, and which were certainly not the distinguishing attributes of the old friend whom Miss Palliser was preparing to join. Mrs. Otway was a well-intentioned but common-minded person, one of the last on earth whom Maria, with her delicacy and penetration, her pride of intellect, her dangerous strength and lamentable weakness, could have chosen for a confidant. There was not even the ordinary inducement of a close uninterrupted intimacy and reciprocation of good offices, to bring the old and the young woman cordially together, and entice the sorrowing girl into the sort of familiarity which will sometimes stand in the place of any higher sentiment, and render us communicative with a friend whose advice weighs little with us, even while we seem to lend it a patient ear.

These two had not met since the childhood of the younger, and the attentions Mrs. Otway was tendering to Maria were attributable rather to the memory of her parents than to the young lady's individual claims to notice or affection; for she remembered her in times past only as a handsome child of unsocial habits and reserved character—a young creature whom she had never felt either the power or inclination to attach.

Ready enough she now was to believe in the improvement of her young visiter, and display a proper

amount of interest in her present position and future fortunes; thinking, poor old lady! that she could not evince this friendly feeling in a better or more acceptable way, than by turning the discourse upon Colonel Hussey, and inquiring minutely as to his person and prospects. Beginning with height and complexion (for the late Mr. Otway had been a handsome man, and his relict still clung to good looks as a desideratum in the marriage state), she proceeded to questions which are generally reckoned of far higher importance—Whether his private fortune was as considerable as had been reported to her? Whether his constitution was calculated for a hot climate? If it *were*, how soon he might stand a chance of getting the next step? And if it were *not*, why then, by a very natural and innocent process, Mrs. Otway sought to inform herself of the exact amount of the pension to which the widow of a lieutenant-colonel of artillery would be entitled.

To Maria—feeling as we have said no inclination to open her heart, or make Mrs. Otway the recipient of any of her secret troubles—the subject was of course distasteful in all its bearings; and the old lady, discouraged by her short and dry answers, soon turned her attention towards things of a past generation, rather than on those in actual progress.

The change of subject, though felt at the moment as a relief, was little more than a variety of torment —another form of mental misery for poor Maria.

Many an anecdote of old times, which Mrs. Otway took the liveliest satisfaction in bringing again to light,

enlarging upon every circumstance with the minuteness and garrulity of old age, and a correctness of memory which was strikingly in contrast to her otherwise failing faculties—many an old story of the Pallisers and Pelhams, quite unknown to their melancholy descendant, or half-forgotten by her, was thus produced for her special entertainment.

Like some old garment, in its best days none of the handsomest, and which has been left for years to the quiet devastations of the moth and the worm, such references to the past are apt to make but a pitiful figure when dragged to light from their decent obscurity, turned this way and shaken that, till the poor finery that has embellished them—the mouldering lace and tinsel—falls piecemeal off, and brings to view the beggarly elements of the stuff it had helped to garnish and conceal. Such as have never known the articles in their days of gala glory, will survey them with indifference or disgust, holding them worthy only of Rag-fair; but they that have owned them themselves, or been concerned in the wearers of them, will have a sigh or a smile to bestow on the threadbare things which bring the days of their youth before them once again.

And so it happened that this old friend of the Pallisers found matter for amusement, and even for mirth, in recollections which, in her heart-stricken companion, excited only those pangs of remorse for others, and shame on her own account, which had made her constantly recoil with loathing from the memory of her childhood.

The most revolting portions of her early history—descriptions of domestic mismanagement and strife, and instances innumerable of that meanness of character which poverty is sure to develop, wherever principle is not sound enough to resist temptation—such things as Maria had shrunk from particularizing even to Lucy Ainsworth, were forced upon her now with the obstinate pertinacity of a mind too coarse in its pristine nature to comprehend the feelings it was exciting, and now grown too obtuse to observe their silent indications.

Mrs. Otway traced with particular relish the downward career of the two wild boys, Maria's brothers, alternately thwarted unjustly, or weakly indulged till they were cast loose upon the world, with little beyond the morality of that bad world to guide them; and with a different species of zest, though scarcely inferior in degree, she went through all the details of the lingering and fatal consumption of the youngest and dearest of the household—the only one of all whose wise and gentle childhood gave hopes of future excellence, and whom Maria had dearly loved. Not one trying incident of the family record did its faithful chronicler spare her, even to the sordid catastrophe of her father expiring in a spunging-house, and the scattering abroad of his ruined children.

In parting with her young friend when the night closed in (happily they kept invalid hours in Chandos Street), Mrs. Otway thanked her warmly for the pleasure her company had already bestowed, declaring "there was nothing she loved so much as talking over

old stories; and she really thought, after such a cheerful, agreeable evening, she should be quite able to sleep soundly, without the composing draught which her good doctor considered so indispensable to her health and comfort."

Meanwhile poor Maria, sitting down weary and heart-sore, thought to herself, as the miseries of the past came thronging around her—"Mine has indeed been a doomed race, and why should I hope that, for me alone, there should be any special exemption from the sorrow, and sin, and shame, that have dogged the footsteps of all belonging to me? No, Colonel Hussey deserves a better lot than to take the daughter of such a house to be the mistress of his home and affections! I must do what I can to persuade him of this; but not to-night. I cannot write yet; my head and my heart are both aching too much: the one will ache for ever, but the other *may* be better to-morrow—and then it shall be done!"

But although a night's repose brought relief to the head, the heart was still too anxious and oppressed with one predominating subject to allow of her undertaking what, in order to be duly performed, required a full concentration of mind and energy. She would conclude her business with Mr. Cranston, before applying herself to the wretched task of throwing off for ever her best—her only friend.

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW DO YOU DO, MR. CRANSTON?

One may conceive the world of conjecture into which Miss Palliser's note had plunged Mr. Frere's bosom friend and most zealous adviser. And yet the word conjecture will hardly serve to describe Mr. Cranston's condition on receiving it; for so utterly at a loss was he to account for the writer's purpose in thus addressing him, that his mind, though an active one and by no means unimaginative, could admit little beyond vague wonder. It was impossible even to guess what was to be the end of this extraordinary assignation.

He had intended leaving London on the very day Miss Palliser requested him to give her the meeting there; but curiosity alone would have sufficed to detain him till after the appointed morning, even had the name of Manley Frere not been the powerful spell wherewith the fair Maria conjured him to remain. What on earth could this lady have to say about his friend, that was to be held such a profound secret between them both? She was an engaged woman, that was one comfort: on the very borders of wedlock; other

wise the thing would really have worn an awkward aspect. But Miss Palliser, though still bearing the maiden appellation, must be regarded in the light of little else than a matron; and she felt this herself, no doubt, so strongly, that she could perceive no sort of harm in making assignations with young men. There was one supposition, by no means improbable, which threatened to convert the incident into something very commonplace; for it occurred to Cranston that there might be some hoax intended by this mysterious letter. The Divets were a free, home-bred race, ever ready for a laugh, and in the habit of playing off practical jokes upon each other, (witness the Patriarch's trick upon Mrs. Sarah.) And yet Cranston was fain to confess, that although she lived amongst the family, he knew few persons less likely to carry out a light extravaganza of this sort than the cold and elegant Miss Palliser; a lady whose deportment had struck him as guarded even to a fault: except indeed, in one single instance, when Richard had seen her manner unbend considerably; so much so as to shew how taking she could be when she liked it, and how strikingly handsome she really was.

"Well, the hour she had named was nearly at hand, and then, if the fair one kept her word, (and an engaged lady *should* know how to keep her plighted troth)—then he would soon be satisfied as to the serious significance of this assignation, and whether there were really any thing of moment touching Manley Frere—but, phoo! that was impossible."

I am afraid Mr. Cranston rather favoured the use of this term of doubtful respectability in relation to Miss Palliser's dealings with him, and amused a fancy somewhat erratic, by reverting to various scenes stowed away in his retentive memory, and highly applicable, as he thought, to his present predicament—scenes in which beautiful ladies, after torturing heroes in drooping hats and plumes and doublets exceedingly slashed, raising their expectations by mysterious messages and keeping them hours in suspense, would make their entrance just in the very nick of time, when the Count or Don Lopez was giving them up in absolute despair—gliding upon the stage in veils impenetrable to mortal eye, or the most tantalizing and bewitching of little black masks.

"Upon his honour," the young rector said to himself, "there was something so extremely Spanish in the whole affair, that he could almost fancy himself in the heart of stately Madrid or gay Sevilla itself;" and, even as he came to this romantic conclusion, the drawing-room door was thrown open to admit Miss Palliser—veiled, not masked.

She entered somewhat hurriedly, and, as she removed the lace which shaded her fine countenance (though this was not done till the servant had retired), she discovered a face so pale, and features so set and rigid, that every conjecture of a hoax was put to flight at once; and Cranston, checking the smile with which he was advancing to meet his fair acquaintance, received her with a bow as solemn and decorous as her own curtsy.

If looks were to be trusted, there must be something serious in all this; and, a thought striking him, he enquired hastily, and with much solicitude, after their good friends at Etheridge—he trusted they were all well when Miss Palliser left the country?

"Quite well," she replied, speaking low, and as Cranston thought with difficulty. They seated themselves, and then there was an awkward pause, during which his curiosity grew intense: he longed to introduce the business that had brought her there, but was wholly undetermined what to say that might lead to his own enlightenment without further embarrassing the lady; but as he was about to speak, Miss Palliser, after compressing her lips as if with some inward struggle, suddenly broke silence—

"You may conclude, Mr. Cranston, that I have not taken such a step as this without some powerful motive to impel me," she stopped a moment. "Your attachment to Mr. Frere" (at that name her complexion slightly changed) "is so well known, that I thought I could not greatly err in coming to consult you in his behalf."

Cranston, wondering more and more what was to follow, hastened to reassure her—"You cannot doubt, madam," he said, "my lively participation in every thing that concerns my friend, Manley Frere. In the note with which you honoured me, you hinted at something of great importance touching him; and you may rest satisfied that my perfect acquaintance with his affairs renders me almost as competent to communicate with

any one who is interested in them, as he himself could be."

"More so, sir!" she rejoined. "Much more so; for where his judgment would be warped and influenced by private feelings, your's can have no temptation to go astray."

Here Maria again faltered in her speech, for the violent beating of her heart increased as she approached the actual subject of her mission, so as almost to impede her utterance; and she sat, striving for self-command and a more entire dominion over her rebellious nerves, as though she had been about to sustain some dreadful operation *minus* chloroform.

Again Cranston tried to help her on her way:—

"Coming so immediately from Etheridge," he said, "it is natural to suppose that the information you have to give me must refer to the place and society in which my friend has been lately moving. Am I right in thinking so? Or, perhaps, your knowledge of his family affairs may have a wider range than I am aware of"——

But here she interrupted him. "It is solely of Etheridge and his connections there that I wish to speak;" then with a perceptible effort she continued, "Mr. Frere has offered himself to Phebe Divet."

Mr. Cranston replied that "he was aware that the proposal had been made," and therewithal eyed his fair guest with an acuter glance and a more profound consideration. But at the name of Frere's shepherdess—a name so pregnant with mischief—so repugnant to her

ears—Miss Palliser grew less mindful of his looks and of her own scruples. For the first time she looked full at her companion, and said more firmly—

"If that union should take place—if Mr. Frere ever marries Phebe Divet, he will be miserable for life!"

Richard started. "Miserable with Miss Divet!" he repeated. "In the name of Heaven, madam, explain yourself! What do you—what *can* you mean?"

"I mean that she is utterly unworthy of him," Maria continued, growing more collected as she found herself fairly embarked in the subject. "She and her family are far from being the good and honest people for whom he takes them. Trust me, sir, who know these Divets thoroughly—your friend has been deceived throughout his whole acquaintance with them."

Seeing Cranston give way to a gesture of incredulity, she went on still more boldly—

"Their aim in inviting him to their house, and their behaviour ever since his entering it, has been one artful and connected scheme to ensnare him into a marriage, which you, best of any one, must be confident he never would have contemplated under any other circumstances. Never could such a woman as Phebe Divet have acquired influence over a man like Manley Frere, had it not been for the unfortunate malady which has laid him open to the machinations of her and her friends."

Here Cranston would have interrupted her, but there was contradiction in his face, and without listening to

him she proceeded in a still more lofty and energetic tone—

"From first to last he has been made the victim of a plot—a family conspiracy, devised and worked out to forward their ambitious and mercenary views. Their friendship for him is a mere pretence. How indeed should they appreciate him? they who are as far from his noble nature, as he is from suspecting their baseness! Many an instance occurs to me as I speak, in which they have slighted and ridiculed him to his very face—yes, even at the moment they were pursuing and oppressing him with their fulsome flattery!"

Cranston's brow grew darker, and his incredulous expression gave place to a frown of displeasure.

"May it not be, ma'am," he coldly suggested, "that you on your part are somewhat too rigid in your moral requirements? The infirmity under which Mr. Frere unhappily labours, is one which necessarily gives rise to occasional misapprehensions: he mistakes what is said to him, as persons deprived of their hearing must occasionally do: such things cannot be always avoided, and if these mistakes, these trifling errors in conversation, should now and then assume a rather ludicrous character"——

"Oh, sir! if you can bear that the man you call your friend, should be made the subject of mockery and derision, I have addressed myself to the wrong person."

Richard coloured, but affected to maintain the same high tone as herself.

"The Divets," he said ("there could be no doubt in

any unprejudiced mind as to *their* character), were a plain, genial, joyous set; not perhaps so observant of the forms of polished society as might always be wished, though he had seen little to censure even on this score; but certainly possessing sterling qualities of the heart, which might well atone for such trifling deficiencies in decorum. And if, occasionally, a good-humoured laugh, or light remark, should have arisen in the strict confidence of their private circle—pardon me, Miss Palliser," he added, sarcastically, "but I do not think the crime is grave enough to draw down upon the devoted family the unlimited condemnation with which you are pleased to visit it."

"Is the double deceit with which they acted towards Mr. Frere and Miss Girdlestone a proof of their honourable character?" she asked, with a look which Cranston seemed to apply to himself, for he answered immediately, "You forget, probably, that it was at my instigation, and with my express approval, that Frere was prevented from seeing her?"

"I do *not* forget it, Mr. Cranston," replied Maria, "nor my own transgression of all that is right in suffering myself to take part in a transaction so dishonourable to every one concerned in it. I felt all the falsehood and baseness of what was going forward, and in that respect, was even more culpable than you, who seem still unable to estimate the true character of the intrigue, and to distinguish right from wrong. Truly we have had our reward, if the result of what was done at that mad time is to be the sacrifice of your friend:

the uniting of all that is high and exalted, to every thing most poor, most false, and worthless."

Stung by her reflections on himself, and highly resenting her mean opinion of the shepherdess, Mr. Cranston arose, and smiling superior, as one conscious of the firmness of his position, retorted—"Epithets like these, applied to Miss Divet, madam, would lead one to question the soundness of your judgment on the rest of her family: of the warmth and sincerity of that young lady's regard for Mr. Frere, we happen to possess the most certain proofs;" and seeing that the solemn assurance made no visible impression on his auditor, Richard repeated it with stronger emphasis than before—"proofs the most convincing and undeniable. What I allude to is a matter of too delicate a nature to be entered into, especially with one who" (here was another sarcastic smile) "does not seem very favourably disposed towards our Etheridge friends. But I hold it only due to Miss Divet, to tell you that what I allude to is a circumstance of such weight, that from henceforth not a shadow of doubt can exist in the mind of either Mr. Frere or myself (whom he has admitted into his entire confidence)—not the *remotest* shade of doubt, with regard to the young lady's strong attachment to my dear and afflicted friend; and happy—most happy may he or any man account himself, who is distinguished as the object of a sentiment so pure and thoroughly disinterested!"

It was after this fashion that Mr. Cranston enunciated his sincere conviction, as he faced Miss Palliser,

standing on the hearthstone, and looking down upon her with a searching eye and a very lofty presence; for he said to himself—"This majestic beauty has evidently a grudge against the Divets, and probably some ambiguous end to answer, in thus attacking them behind their back."

The impertinence of Cranston's manner, though not unperceived by Maria, could not deter her from the disclosure she came to make; for she saw well that he would believe her on no other terms than a full confession. "You are alluding," she said, in a faltering voice, "to a letter—a letter which fell into Mr. Frere's hands, while he was walking in the manor-house garden at Etheridge"—— As she spoke these words, Richard Cranston changed his easy, not to call it insolent attitude, and stood upright as a dart; "and supposed," Maria continued reluctantly, and looking away from her companion—"supposed by him to be addressed to Phebe Divet."

"Precisely!" he replied; wondering much how she could have gained her information: and yet, as he observed the rising colour which was now flushing the whole countenance of the Colonel's betrothed lady, Cranston began to have suspicions bordering very nearly on the truth. He waited a moment in anxious expectation, and then Miss Palliser, in a voice still lower, whispered, "That letter was addressed to another person; *not* to Phebe Divet!"

"Good God!" he exclaimed, and turned away in confusion scarcely inferior to her own; for her meaning

was not to be misunderstood, and yet, prepossessed as he was with a totally different explanation of the mystery, it caused him a severe struggle before he could entertain the new suggestion with any patience.

"But," he began again, returning to the charge after pacing the length of the room in deep consideration, "why should Frere have been so mistaken? Not a doubt remained with him that this correspondence, conveyed by the merest chance into his possession—and which I beg you to believe he would never have looked into had he not believed it in the first instance intended for his perusal—You know, I presume, how it fell into his hands?"

"Yes, yes!" (impatiently)—"I know it all."

"Well, then, no question at any time seems to have entered his mind respecting the real owner of the letter. How was it possible for him to fall into so great an error with this document before his very eyes?"

It was well-nigh intolerable to the sensitive and high-spirited Maria Palliser to find herself thus catechised.

She had imagined that a word—a hint, would have served to satisfy Cranston, and had brought an old letter of Lucy Ainsworth's in her pocket; not from any idea of having her testimony questioned, but because she thought her painful confession might be more easily made—at all events in fewer words—by pointing to her cousin's signature, and thus demonstrating who were the real authors of the disastrous correspondence.

Now, with mixed feelings of anger and mortification, she produced this letter, saying haughtily, through the

tears her woman's nature was ringing from her, "As you appear to doubt me, sir—though Heaven knows *why* you should suspect me of fabricating a story so humiliating to myself,"—she stopped, wrestling against the agonized sob that rent her bosom, and which even Cranston could not hearken to without some touch of pity, and putting the paper into his hand, finished what she had to say, "This letter will confirm the statement I have considered it a sacred duty to make. If you will do me the favour to cast your eye over it, you may satisfy yourself that I am speaking the truth: at least" (with some bitterness), "supposing Mr. Frere has been so unmindful of propriety as to shew you the original letter, you will see that they are in the same hand." Again her spirit rebelled against the minute explanation which her interrogator seemed to require, but she forced herself to add, "My cousin, Miss Ainsworth, has not the smallest acquaintance with any of the Divets."

Cranston, by this time half-ashamed of the tone he was adopting towards one who, whatever she might be, was evidently suffering no common penalty for her transgressions, was anxious to decline any further testimony as wholly superfluous; but Miss Palliser, growing reckless in her misery, and choosing that he should at least have the option of satisfying himself, threw the letter open upon the table before him, and as he hastily took it up and folded it to return it to her, his eye happened to fall on the word "Lucy," the christian name in the concluding signature of that memorable epistle, and the only portion of which Shako's teeth had left legible.

He recollected the circumstance, because his friend, with a degree of pique not very unnatural considering the hard judgment he had sustained at the hand of Miss Ainsworth, had launched an angry joke against this very name of Lucy.

Richard remembered also how inconsonant had seemed to Manley Frere the style of language adopted by this lady, to the character of the lively little person whom he believed her to be addressing: the stern, high lecture, the solemn warning, had struck him as something little else than bombastic, when aimed only at his little shepherdess; but applied to the bride-elect of Colonel Hussey, the reproof lost all its inconsistency, and could not be too severe.

Willingly, now, would he have pursued the subject. Upon that part of it, indeed, which related exclusively to herself, Cranston could not expect Miss Palliser to be more explicit. Constrained by his incredulity, she had made confession of her love for Frere, with such unaffected reluctance and such painful confusion, as had almost served to disguise the indelicacy of the avowal. With such feelings Richard had no right to tamper; but with regard to the Divets, and her unqualified censure of *them*, no modest scruple existed to deter him from the freest communication; and he was about to examine her minutely on the grounds of her accusation, but by this time Maria's sole aim was to close the colloquy as quickly as possible, and retreat from a scene, the painful and humiliating character of which had exceeded her fearfullest anticipations.

She had fulfilled the purpose that brought her there, having placed Mr. Cranston in possession of all she held requisite to the rescue of his friend; but that gentleman had not received her information in such a spirit as to induce her to be more particularly communicative, or, indeed, to continue in his company one moment longer than she could help. Conscious of her own integrity in all that concerned Frere, the cold suspicion of the young rector, and his evident desire to discredit her representations, disappointed as much as it mortified her. His insolent mistrust—for in that light she regarded it—had made itself palpable from the very outset of their conference: no wonder that Maria Palliser, heart-sore and conscience-stricken, took sad refuge again in her old constitutional reserve, and resumed all her mistrust of man and his motives.

"I have now," she said, "at the cost of my own reputation, made you acquainted with the false position in which it has been my misfortune to place your friend. If you should leave him to fall a victim to this wretched misunderstanding and to the arts of an unprincipled family, it will be a subject of eternal regret to me; but the blame, Mr. Cranston, will rest on you. I have done my part; do you do yours, and interfere before it is too late to save him."

Having said this, she turned from him with the step and bearing of a queen; and though Richard longed to humble her to her former shyness by some apt allusion to Colonel Hussey, he might have had the cruelty to do it, but could not find the courage.

She utterly disregarded some attempt he made to detain her, and they went down-stairs together in silence: in silence he offered to conduct her to the carriage which was waiting at the door, and was repulsed with the same taciturnity; but just as he was leaving her she called him back to the coach-door, and renewed her warning with a still higher expression of sad solemnity. "Remember, Mr. Cranston," she said, "that whatever your impression of me may be—the facts I have made you acquainted with remain the same. And, for the last time, I bid you remember that the fate of Mr. Frere—his happiness, his honour even—is in your hands! I can say no more to urge you:—may you be directed by some higher influence than my weak, erring voice!"

Earnest and imploring as were the last words of Maria Palliser, she felt, in parting from Mr. Cranston, that she had entirely failed to weaken, much less to overthrow, his previous convictions; and she left him, stung with the reflection that she had lowered her character and overstepped the modesty of her sex, without gaining the sole compensation which could have consoled her for the questionable undertaking. With her singular facility in reading the thoughts of others (a natural penetration which, except in one fatal instance, had seldom misled her), she perceived a resolute incredulity in the half-defiant glance of his eye: it was a look which interpreted his meaning almost as certainly as if he had pronounced in her very ear the half-muttered words with which he lost sight of her:—

"A would-be mischief-maker!" such was Mr. Cranston's soliloquy. "Evidently that most abominable of characters, a female slanderer. She is unable to compass her own unprincipled desires, and so consoles herself by attempting to destroy the good fortune of the friend she envies. Who can tell, with all her pretence of prudery, what arts she may not have been exerting to get Frere into her own power? Wretched woman! Sincerely I trust by this time he is safe from her machinations—happy in the frank acceptance of his dear little shepherdess." And Cranston finished his soliloquy with a bitter comparison between Colonel Hussey's betrothed and Frere's first love; vowing to himself that he hardly knew which was the worst, and should never give over wondering at the fantastic concatenation of events, which had forced him into contact with two such finished specimens of the genus jilt.

And yet, with all his ill opinion of Maria, her parting words could not be heard by Cranston with perfect indifference. Whatever improprieties her character exhibited, she had enforced upon him a truth it was impossible to deny: a heavy responsibility *did* rest with him, and sad would be the event to Manley Frere, and unceasing his own remorse, should he, through any want of caution, any undue prepossession, or weak prejudice, be led to abuse the power intrusted to him.

Place what reliance he might on the outward seeming of the Etheridge family, he could not help comparing the limited extent of his own information as to the inner-life at the manor-house, with that which Miss

Palliser had had the opportunity of acquiring. "Ah!" he murmured peevishly, "it was all the fault of that Barbara Girdlestone—another of the fair and faithless shes!" who seemed commissioned about this time to try his patience to the utmost. But for *her* unseasonable presence, where nobody wanted it, he should still have been at the mansion, making his impartial observations, and prosecuting the nicest inquisition into character and manners.

And as circumstances rendered this impossible, Richard Cranston began to wish that Frere had not so thoroughly committed himself with Phebe Divet. What had invested that young lady with such peculiar interest, seeming to designate her as the Heaven-appointed helpmate of his afflicted friend, no longer existed. Divet's daughter stood now, with reference to Frere, in no respect distinguished from the common crowd of women, who would be ready to take him whether they loved or loved him not; provided the deaf man were still able to endow them with his worldly goods and his place in society.

Then, on the other hand—for the much-perplexed rector was seldom two minutes in the same frame of mind—Miss Divet was, at any rate, a charming girl, with just the qualities, of high spirits and untiring energy, which must render her a valuable companion for a man under Frere's circumstances. Could any thing be sweeter in female shape—more modest, yet devoted, than she had shewn herself in her graceful attentions to the deaf guest?

Though the romance that seemed so prettily appertaining to her must perforce be given up, it was surely hard upon the gentle little creature that her true sentiments should be questioned for an error which was certainly no fault of hers. Phebe's correspondence with some bosom friend might be found to express quite as high an appreciation of Manley Frere, as was hinted at in the letter which Shako had put into his master's possession.

And even if disposed to lend an ear to the baleful insinuations of a declared rival, how, Cranston asked himself, was he to proceed with the mission intrusted to him with such an almost awful solemnity? He had no pretence for returning to Etheridge, where the mischief —if it really existed—could alone be traced out; nor, indeed, supposing him able to frame any plausible excuse for quartering himself on the Divets, was he at liberty to devote his time exclusively to the service of his friend.

As for disturbing Frere's peace of mind, and jarring the perfect harmony which subsisted between him and his new love, by instilling vague surmises and ungrateful suspicions; Cranston judged that, in the present undecided state of his own convictions, such a proceeding would be worse than useless. The more Richard grew conscious of the sort of doubt which was creeping upon himself in a matter which he had hitherto contemplated as a triumphant certainty, the more desirous was he to shield his friend from any such cold and comfortless misgivings: at least until a stronger light might be thrown upon the subject. Supposing the Colonel's

mistress so lost to self-respect as to force her representations upon Frere himself—why, the faithful Richard could not help it; but from no hint or innuendo of his own should his beloved friend learn a syllable of the matter.

The effect which this interview produced upon Maria can scarcely be too vividly described. She had foreseen that, under any circumstances, her confession must be deeply mortifying; but she had never anticipated its being received with such cold and guarded mistrust, and of having a disclosure, which it tortured her to utter, weighed and examined with all the astuteness of a cavilling counsellor. She saw that in confiding her secret to this prejudiced man, she had injured herself without advancing the interests of his friend. The odium she had striven to excite against the Divets had recoiled upon her own defenceless head; and now, even the poor satisfaction of being remembered in a kindly spirit by Manley Frere would be denied her: his friend would teach him to hold her memory in aversion and contempt.

Goaded by thoughts like these, Maria almost wished that she had cast herself at once on the honour and compassion of Mr. Frere. He would not so have misinterpreted and insulted her: and she thought that if once awakened to a suspicion of the truth, the fine feeling in his own breast would be sure to guide him rightly in estimating the false friends amongst whom he had fallen. "And then! and then!"—and here, for the last time, wild fancy took the lead—"and then, when

quite convinced who the foolish creature was that had treasured his image so deeply within her heart—what might not yet have happened? He had shown that the disinterested love of woman had power to subdue him; and was the childish, insignificant Phebe Divet the *only* one capable of achieving such a noble victory?"

In the only luxury she could now command, that of silent solitude, did Maria wend back from her thriftless expedition; and the tears she had sedulously repressed in the sight of Mr. Cranston, flowed unremittingly till the end of her drive.

END OF VOL. II.

SMITH, ELDER, AND CO., 65, CORNHILL.